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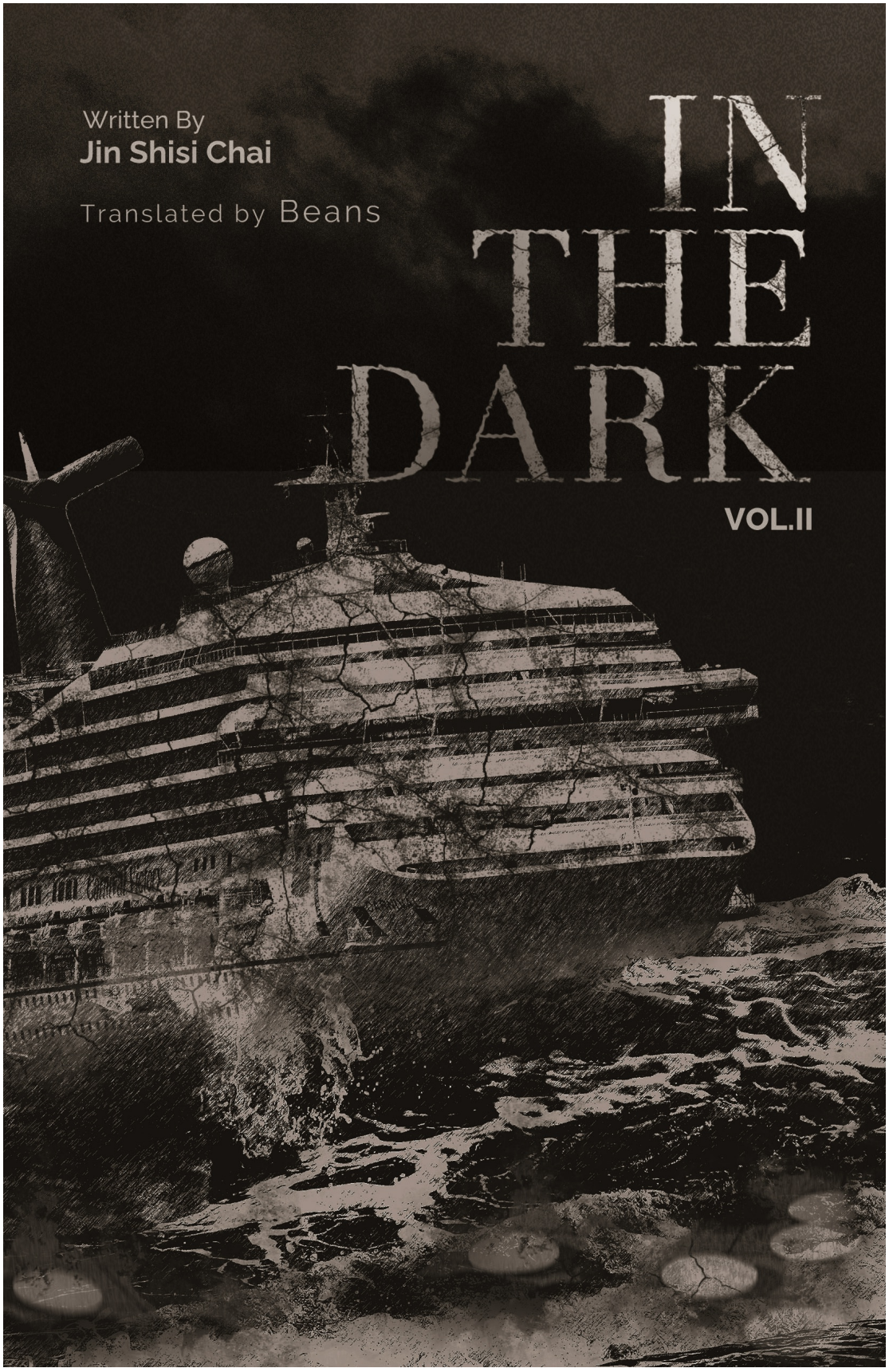
IN THE DARK

VOL.II



In the Dark

Volume 2

Jin Shisi Chai

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Mean Girl

After the settlement of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* case, the antique trade market virtually disappeared overnight, leaving Tao Jun and Liu Yanbo in a good mood. They praised the violent crimes unit for their hard work and brought another piece of news: Shen Liufei was going to stay long term in Hanhai City as a bureau-sponsored specialist of forensic sketching. The artist was now officially a part of the team. Xie Lanshan would have to see him every day, which he wasn't particularly excited about.

Ever since that punch, Shen Liufei had settled back into his usual aloof and unfathomable self. Whenever the two met in the hallways, cafeteria, or even office space, the artist would mercilessly push away Xie Lanshan's attempts to reconcile.

A warm smile couldn't melt an iceberg, but that only fueled Xie Lanshan's frustration even further. For the first time, Xie Lanshan played tough, swearing he would not bow down to this stubborn man.

At the same time, his headaches came back in full force, but not even the doctors in the hospital could help him this time. Exhausted, Xie Lanshan walked toward the cafeteria with his head hanging, not noticing he had almost run into someone. Taking a few steps back, the person greeted him but, after seeing Xie Lanshan hadn't noticed, walked over and called, "Hey, you dozing off again? What are you thinking?"

Xie Lanshan lifted his head to see his colleague Xiao Qian, who was handling the Hunting Net Operation. Earlier, he'd given the young man the portrait of the woman in his dreams to investigate, which must have been why Xiao Qian called him over. Xie Lanshan's whole body tensed and goosebumps crawled all the way to his arms. "Did you... find something?"

"About that woman's portrait, I've already checked with all the homicide cases recorded on the Hunting Net Operations database. No such person exists."

"Are you sure?" Xie Lanshan let out a sigh of relief. Thank goodness—a better result than he expected.

"Of course. Why would I lie?" Xiao Qian was puzzled. "You really want such a pretty girl to die?"

"No, it's good she's not there." The more he thought about the woman, the worse his headache got. He was ready to walk into the cafeteria.

“You still haven’t told me,” Xiao Qian called out to him. “Just who is she?”

“An old neighbor I haven’t been in contact with for years came to me with a case from his small town. We don’t know her name, but Mr. Shen and I helped work on the sketch; that’s all we know,” Xie Lanshan lied through his teeth.

“Then I have a suggestion—why don’t you try checking the database for missing persons? Maybe she wasn’t killed; it could be a kidnapping, a missing person, or a human-trafficking case. The cases kept in the Hunting Net Operations database are from decades ago; it might not even be the right time period.”

Frowning, Xie Lanshan fell into deep thought. The pool of blood in his dreams was horribly realistic, and the cries of the woman haunted his mind. He was certain she was murdered. If her body had never been found, his investigation would be much more difficult. Tens of thousands of missing person records showed up across the country every year, excluding ones never reported. It would be like fishing for a needle in the ocean—where was he supposed to find this woman who only appeared in his dreams?

“Hey, Xie Lanshan? Xie Lanshan?” his colleague called.

Xie Lanshan pulled himself back to reality, thanked the young man, and walked toward the cafeteria, rubbing his temples.

Almost as soon as he opened the door, someone called for him, “A-Lan, over here!”

Four sat at the table: the two Taos, Song Qilian, and her son, Liu Chang. Song Qilian was here to deliver Xie Lanshan’s psychological assessment to Tao Jun and had been invited to stay for lunch.

Xie Lanshan walked over and asked Song Qilian, “How are you here just for a report?”

Song Qilian smiled. “I happened to be around and figured I might as well stop by. I do have my own agenda too, though. Changchang wants to learn to swim, and you know how I am with water; I’ve practically given up on floating. So, I wanted to ask you, if it’s not too much trouble, to help him again.”

Even Tao Longyue could understand Song Qilian’s ulterior motive; she was trying to use her son to get closer to her old crush. Yet Xie Lanshan still seemed oblivious to the intention. “Swimming lessons at a time like this? Did he not learn over summer?”

It was already the end of September, on the brink of autumn. The temperature outside was dropping.

Song Qilian gave him another smile. Lifting his head, Liu Chang tugged on Xie Lanshan’s clothes. “Uncle Xie, pretty please?”

Tao Longyue stuck his head out to peek from behind Xie Lanshan, then called out, “Hey there, Mr. Shen!”

Shen Liufei and Liu Yanbo approached them. Xie Lanshan’s eyes met the gaze of the artist for a few moments before they both looked away. The trench of awkwardness still ran deep.

Xie Lanshan picked Liu Chang up in front of Shen Liufei and spoke kindly to the boy like a young father. “I see you got some tough bones in you, little guy.” His eyes narrowed into pleasant curves. “Are you done eating? Uncle will take you out to swim when you are.”

The little boy nodded dramatically, then turned to wink at his mom.

Captain Tao was a disciplined man, so he called out to his colleague as he saw Xie Lanshan ready to take the boy out, “Don’t think you can walk off because you solved a big case—you’re not off the clock yet!”

Without turning his head, Xie Lanshan said, “I’m taking the rest of the day off.” His gaze glossed over Shen Liufei.

They arrived at a public pool next to a park. The pool was fairly empty, leaving Song Qilian alone and deep in thought at the shallow end, after she changed into her bathing suit.

Despite being Xie Lanshan’s primary therapist, she had never treated him as a patient who needed professional help. Sui Hong had said there was no need, but recalling her actions, she admitted past experiences and personal feelings limited her judgment. The man had certainly changed a lot, but could she describe how?

When a small commotion caused by some young women sounded from the pool, Song Qilian surfaced from her deep thoughts. As the group stared in admiration at the handsome and tall man, all the women’s hearts skipped a beat. Even two men holding their breaths underwater couldn’t help but poke their heads out and turn toward Xie Lanshan.

As he walked out, Xie Lanshan held Liu Chang’s hands, letting the little boy grab gently onto his fingers. The man was aware of his attractiveness and purposefully directed all attention to him with this gesture and his faint but pretty smile.

But how could she describe this change? Song Qilian thought about it; Chinese people always said humans were molded from mud by the Goddess Nuwa, but Xie Lanshan seemed to have been shattered, broken, and remolded anew.

Once, during the lantern festival while they were still students, Liu Mingfang had ambushed Xie Lanshan, drenching the young man’s whole body with mud near Song Qilian’s house. The young girl saw the dirty boy and invited him inside to wash off. Delivering him a clean towel, Song Qilian

accidentally interrupted him.

Xie Lanshan stood behind the shower curtain, which wasn't fully rolled down. The young girl didn't even have time to feel flustered, but Xie Lanshan had panicked. After struggling to roll down the curtains, the boy slipped onto the ground with a loud thump. Song Qilian already had her back turned and giggled at his clumsiness.

Nevertheless, she remembered it very clearly. Xie Lanshan had a tiny red birthmark near his tailbone that was only a little larger than a mole hidden on a strange part of his body no one would notice. She was almost certain even Xie Lanshan himself didn't know about it.

As she considered this, Xie Lanshan took Liu Chang to Song Qilian and pulled out some coins from his pocket to buy drinks.

While the man walked toward the vending machine, Song Qilian pulled her son over. "Did you do what Mommy asked you to?"

Liu Chang boasted, "Mommy, why are you making me stare at Uncle Xie's butt? Can't you just look at it yourself after you guys get married?"

Those words reminded her of some painful memories. Song Qilian held back the sourness that threatened at her throat. "So does he have it or not?"

Liu Chang shook his head firmly. "I looked—there's nothing. It's even smoother and whiter than all those pretty girl booties out there."

A good swim finally relieved all of Xie Lanshan's pent-up frustration. After recovering his good mood, he invited Song Qilian and her son to dinner.

As Xie Lanshan helped Song Qilian split up the dishes on the table, he noticed the woman seemed to be consumed in thought. He quickly apologized for ditching his therapy session halfway through last time, clapping his hands together sincerely.

"Do I look like I hold grudges that easily?" Song Qilian gave him a small smile, attempting to hide the shade of unease on her face. "I'm thinking about your situation."

"Me?" Xie Lanshan laughed. "What could possibly be wrong with me?"

"Didn't you say you've been having headaches lately? I'm wondering if that's a side effect of your open-brain surgery."

"Open-brain surgery? When did that happen?" Xie Lanshan was shocked; he never recalled having gone through something so invasive in his life.

"Last time you asked me to receive your medical report, your primary physician told me that you had a craniotomy. Do you not remember it?" Since she consciously avoided viewing the man as her former lover, Song Qilian's sharp senses as a professional had returned. She attempted to capture any hint of the man lying, but Xie Lanshan really seemed to be out of the loop.

A strange feeling pressed down on Xie Lanshan, triggering that tobacco addiction he hadn't felt in a long while. He pulled out a cigarette from a mint-

green box and put it in his mouth.

Song Qilian reminded him, “Changchang’s around too.”

Before he could light a fire, Xie Lanshan noticed the little boy staring at him and apologized. He pulled the cigarette out of his mouth and put it aside.

The little boy’s patience ran out while they were still eating; he wanted to watch the night sky on the roof of the hotel. Having decided to play parent through the rest of the day, Xie Lanshan picked the boy up in his arms and took him upstairs.

Suspicion loomed above them, as if hidden secrets were waiting to be uncovered. Song Qilian turned to watch the two play and pay no attention to their surroundings. Quietly, she picked up the cigarette Xie Lanshan left, wrapped it in a napkin, and placed it inside her purse.

(ii)

The Hunting Net Operation enforced the collaborative efforts of the police departments across cities and provinces. Xiao Qian had no luck searching for Xie Lanshan’s woman in the portrait through the operation. However, when he searched elsewhere, he made an appalling discovery: the young woman was a missing person recorded in a city a thousand kilometers from Hanhai.

Xiao Qian went to contact Xie Lanshan, but the man was out of the bureau with Captain Tao. Within the last few days, narcotics-related reports had surged, once again stirring a minor storm within Hanhai and dooming the bustling city to a period of unrest.

Pondering if he wanted to place the files on the man’s desk, Xiao Qian noticed Shen Liufei walk past the hallway outside.

He quickly rushed over. “Mr. Shen, good timing.”

Shen Liufei walked toward the young man, a question in his gaze.

“I actually did end up finding the woman from the missing persons database, but Xie Lanshan isn’t here, so you can take the files.”

Shen Liufei asked, “What files?”

“Xie Lanshan told me you two were in charge of a case and that you even helped create her portrait.”

Shen Liufei recalled the event, then nodded.

“Mr. Shen, I need to head out for fieldwork soon, so I’ll leave this for you to hand to Xie Lanshan.”

Shen Liufei took the file and glanced at the notes inside. The seventeen-year-old girl Zhuo Tian had gone missing six years ago. The victim had called the police just before she disappeared to report she was being sexually harassed, but by the time the police arrived, they couldn’t find the young woman anywhere, as if she had vanished from this world.

As Shen Liufei stood against the light, a shadow cast over his face, making his seemingly gentle features suddenly grow grave and dark; his gaze became cold, hiding any emotions he had behind a haze.

Shen Liufei scanned a few pages of Zhuo Tian's files with mild disinterest before looking at Xiao Qian. "I'll handle it."

The exchange instinctively brought a chill through Xiao Qian, who quickly averted his eyes as if he himself was afraid of being consumed by the murkiness of Shen Liufei's gaze.

After the other young man left, Shen Liufei asked Ding Li when Xie Lanshan was expected to return. Ding Li admitted she didn't know either and, considering the late hour, he would likely go straight home after they collected evidence for today's case. She said someone reported a few girls around high school age getting high at a bar, and just what were these young girls thinking? Addictive drugs could haunt you for life, even if the first attempt was made out of curiosity. Ding Li let out a deep sigh.

By the time Xie Lanshan finished collecting evidence at the reported bar, it was 11 P.M. He bid Tao Longyue farewell and returned home.

He passed by a dark street corner—one that had once been the regular stop for a familiar food cart. Uncle Tan was no longer around. According to Tao Longyue, he had been sent back to the jurisdiction of the murder and was waiting for the long-overdue verdict on the twenty-year-old cold case. Due to the many complaints over the lack of lighting during nighttime, a bright streetlight had replaced Uncle Tan's post. Without him, many local women had grown too frightened to walk down the street at night.

Now the empty street and lonesome streetlight's only enduring companions were the lone old tree and the autumn breeze. The tree's shadow wavered with the wind, finally settling back down and leaving only fragments of moonlight on the ground.

For a moment, Xie Lanshan could feel the old man's loneliness, and his own solitude.

The moment he got back home, Xie Lanshan walked into the shower. Song Qilian's comment about the surgery he'd supposedly had repeated in his mind, and he felt like his whole body reeked of fresh blood. Cold water ran down his body. After the rinse, a dripping wet and naked Xie Lanshan walked toward the mirror.

He leaned in close, carefully pulling his wet hair up. His life had always been simple; he spent little time caring for himself. If Song Qilian hadn't mentioned it, he might have never noticed the scar on his own body. The thin line had healed well, almost to the point it was invisible beneath his black hair, like a hidden relic carrying sorrows left behind in the darkness.

Xie Lanshan stood upright again in front of the mirror, desperately digging through his memories, yet when he recalled his days undercover, he only remembered the strong and courageous Annie, the arrogant Gold Tooth, and the comrades who had died by the streetside. His memory of this injury was only a blur.

Perhaps the scar had been from the day before the collaborative multinational operation.

In order to pass on intel to Sui Hong, Xie Lanshan had taken a vacation and temporarily left Mu Kun. On his way back, he saw gang members drag a young girl into a dark alley. He hadn't realized he was being lured into a trap.

The people were under the orders of Gold Tooth, who hated Xie Lanshan for the young man's closeness with Mu Kun, and for standing in the way of his own goals to climb higher in the pyramid.

One by one, Xie Lanshan took the gang members down, but his enemies were too numerous. Just before he blacked out, one restrained his hands while another held up a metal pole and swung right at his head—

Abruptly, his recollection stopped. The scar left on his head might have been from this incident. Though snow-white light lit the bathroom, the darkness from that night seeped toward him, swallowing his flesh.

In the dark, the handsome face in the mirror twisted into that of a demon. Xie Lanshan turned to the face and gently asked it, *Who are you?*

Then the doorbell rang.

Xie Lanshan wrapped a towel around his waist and walked out of the bathroom to greet his evening visitor. The moment he opened the door, the visitor's face came into sight and, feeling the heavy fog disperse, Xie Lanshan greeted the individual with a smile. "What a rare visit from my good cousin."

Despite his bright grin, Xie Lanshan still remembered his one-sided oath and refused to back down. He stood in front of the door, blocking Shen Liufei's way. "So, tell me, are you here to see me or your cat sons?"

Shen Liufei pushed the man aside, inviting himself in. "Same difference."

"Of course it's not." Xie Lanshan pulled out a pack of cat food from the drawer and gave Shen Liufei a playful wink. He raised his voice purposely. "Look at this shitty man forgetting about his wife now that he's got kids to care for."

Thanks to their voracious appetite and the food, the five kittens were growing big and were old enough to run around on their own. They were all quite smart and remembered Shen Liufei as well. The moment they heard his voice, they all rushed toward the visitor and crawled by his feet.

Squatting, Xie Lanshan patiently fed the five kittens. Their bowls were in the shape of petals and made the shape of a full flower when placed together.

He split the food evenly among all five, ensuring all the kittens had a fair chance of filling their stomachs.

Staring at these pink and flowery bowls, Shen Liufei lifted an eyebrow. He might not have vocalized it, but he was clearly sending a message with his gaze: *That's a pretty girly aesthetic.*

Xie Lanshan waved his hand. "It's from that little girl. She insisted I take the bowls to feed the five furballs."

Even after placing the food down, Xie Lanshan didn't stand, instead watching the kittens eat. The milk-colored kitten rubbed against his legs, so he gently patted its head.

Xie Lanshan's gaze was fixed on the kittens, while Shen Liufei's gaze was fixed on the man.

The squat wasn't particularly elegant or comfortable. The towel over his waist loosened and slipped below his hips, exposing his fine hipline and a hint of his buttocks, hovering dangerously close to scandalous. Xie Lanshan pulled the towel up just in time and retied it. He winked at Shen Liufei. "Oh, I can explain; I swear I'm not trying to seduce you. Of course, if you really can't hold yourself back, you don't hesitate to let me know."

The words sounded like a joke, but his eyes were filled with something more. Like a dimly lit torch, something inside them could easily burst into flames at any response from the other man.

Shen Liufei purposely avoided those eyes. "Two things."

Xie Lanshan leaned back on the sofa, still speaking in a flippant tone. "I'm all ears."

"Tang Xiaomo will be leaving Hanhai tomorrow. She said she'll be staying with her relatives in another province and wanted to say goodbye to you."

The grandfather she had been searching for was now in jail, completely shattering her admiration and reverential image of the old man. Her shock at the truth was natural. Xie Lanshan sighed. "Is she taking the train or flying? I'll send her off."

"One more thing." Shen Liufei handed the file he'd received from Xiao Qian to Xie Lanshan. "About the girl you've been searching for."

"She really... she really exists?" Xie Lanshan's heart raced. The envelope wasn't particularly thick, but it felt like a heavy weight. His hands shook.

He'd daydreamed and even actually dreamed about this, thinking about all sorts of possibilities that might arise, but he hadn't expected facing reality would be so difficult when his delusions came true.

He'd had a craniotomy, and a certain possibility was becoming clear and increasingly closer to the truth at this moment. In some way, the injury to his head and his lost memories were connected to the mystery of the girl's fate.

Xie Lanshan tossed the envelope onto the tea table. He lit a cigarette, blew out a few clouds of smoke with a shaking hand, and then extinguished the flame.

Having accomplished his mission, Shen Liufei was ready to leave. His face was as blank as usual.

“Hey, cuz, don’t leave.” Xie Lanshan seemed particularly helpless; he reached to grab Shen Liufei’s wrist, desperately trying to hold back the man who could give him the slightest bit of comfort.

Startled, Shen Liufei seemed captivated by the other man’s attractive eyes and attractive smile. The coldness on his face melted as he seemed gripped not only by the wrist but by every word and every motion Xie Lanshan made.

“Shen Liufei, please stay with me for the night.” Xie Lanshan pulled Shen Liufei’s wrist close to his face. He gently caressed the hand and brushed it against his lips, then said in an almost pleading tone, “Stay by my side... and face it with me, please.”

Shen Liufei could almost feel himself giving in—until his gaze fell on the file lying on the tea table. The little warmth and sympathy inside him quickly diminished.

He pulled his hand from Xie Lanshan’s grip and walked out the door without another word.

(iii)

After weathering through a long night, Xie Lanshan gave Tang Xiaomo a call to offer her a ride to the airport.

The sunlight at the tail end of September was withering, so streams of light shone on the long and wide highway leading straight to the airport. The trees were already tinged in autumn red, creating a vibrant mix of green and crimson along the roadside.

Despite passing through the ethereal scenery, neither passenger was in the mood to enjoy the view. Xie Lanshan would occasionally turn to look at Tang Xiaomo and her wistful expression. She sat quietly in the passenger seat, giving off a fatigued and melancholic air.

After arriving at the airport, Tang Xiaomo gave Xie Lanshan a hug. She told him she was simply going away for a change of pace. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve been living like this for the past ten years, like a dandelion seed just floating everywhere and growing wherever I land. Who knows? Maybe one day I’ll get over myself and come back again.”

The girl attempted to smile but couldn’t stop the tears rolling down from the corners of her eyes. Xie Lanshan wiped her face gently only to see more quickly well back up. He repeated the motion.

As if picking out pearls from a sea of sand, Tang Xiaomo recalled many memories she'd had with her grandfather when she was little. She'd watched him work as a proud artist, as he'd always defined himself by his craft. The young girl finally cried out loud, "I don't get it..."

How could a dream the man had been chasing for decades suddenly be crushed overnight? She didn't know whether the people had changed or if it was the world that had.

Furrowing his brow, Xie Lanshan listened quietly. He carefully picked up a red maple leaf that had landed on Tang Xiaomo's shoulders.

"The human heart and changes in the world are two things you can't make sense of. If time flies like an arrow you can never seem to catch, you might as well stay where you're at and enjoy your time in peace." He picked up a beautiful fallen autumn leaf and solemnly gave it to the young girl. Xie Lanshan smiled and said, "Fall's going to be extra busy this year; if you can make it out, you should come back for a visit sometime."

After sending Tang Xiaomo off, Xie Lanshan drove back with a heavy heart. His mind was not completely on the road. The previous night had been too stressful and long; he'd stayed up and was already worn out.

In the end, he never opened the file.

Dragging it out another day wouldn't be so bad, Xie Lanshan thought, then he scolded himself: *Bastard.*

Occupied with the woman in his dreams and Shen Liufei, Xie Lanshan didn't notice a girl riding a bicycle rush out onto the road. By the time he stepped on the brakes, he had already hit her.

Thankfully, he stopped quickly and only knocked the bicycle to the ground. The girl seemed fine and was able to pull herself up.

Xie Lanshan's heart virtually jumped out of his chest; he rushed from his car and ran toward the girl. "Are you all right?"

"I'm... I'm okay, just bruised myself a little." A large mark marred the girl's leg, and the skin on her elbow had been scraped off as well. As she wobbled upright, a few items from her backpack dropped out, so she bent down and picked them back up.

"I'm a cop." Xie Lanshan showed his badge. "Do you need me to take you to the hospital?"

"No thanks, I'm in a rush." The girl hurriedly placed her belongings back into her bag and stood up to leave, yet as soon as she took a step, she lost balance and almost fell back down.

Xie Lanshan caught her, then said a little more aggressively, "Let me take you to the hospital."

The girl quickly waved her hand. "No thanks, you really don't need to!" She pondered a little longer before relenting. "I can't use this bike anymore.

I’m supposed to go out with a friend today on a cruise—do you think you can give me a ride over?”

Xie Lanshan agreed. As he escorted her to the pier, he asked the girl questions about herself. Zuo Ruoqi was a second-year high school student from St. Noe All-Girls High School. A classmate was hosting a birthday party on a cruise and had invited a few close friends to join her for the party.

“A cruise? Did you guys rent a boat out?” How well-off high school girls these days had to be to host such a grand birthday party.

“No.” Zuo Ruoqi shook her head. “Her family owns a private ship. They also own the Starex Group—you’ve heard of them before, right?”

“Starex? Your classmate is Peng Yixuan?” He’d heard the name many times, of course. The group was one of the top corporations in the country and owned by Peng Hongbin, who specialized in real estate. The group had expanded into more creative and business development industries, flourishing in all fields.

Peng Hongbin had a son and a daughter. The son was Peng Cheng, aka the lady-killer, and he was often the subject of celebrity news. Both a charmer and a tycoon, he stood at the top of the social pyramid. The aforementioned daughter was Peng Yixuan. Due to her young age, she rarely appeared in the public eye, but rumor had it she was studying at a private all-girls high school for the wealthy.

The destination was right by the beach and not too far of a drive. Following Zuo Ruoqi’s directions, Xie Lanshan dropped her off quickly. He glanced at the private cruise ship parked by the pier, awed.

The *Starglow*—a cruise ship brighter than the golden shades of autumn and vaster than the ocean—stood like a grand monument. The exterior of the ship was unique and beautiful, like a dolphin floating on top of the water. The main body was a silver-white that glinted iridescently under the bright sunlight. Rumor had it a year’s worth of docking permits at this pier cost at least two hundred thousand yuan a year.

Seeing Zuo Ruoqi’s injuries were quite severe, Xie Lanshan escorted the young girl to the ship.

“We’ve been waiting for you—what took you so long?” another young girl’s voice rang out, and then a crowd of high school girls rushed from the ship.

A total of six girls and a teacher were attending the cruise. Aside from the ship’s captain, the entire crew was female. As soon as these women saw a young and handsome man walk over, they rushed over and circled him like prey.

The group was made up of finely dressed high school girls. Since he was escorting the latecomer, Xie Lanshan was forced to greet them and scanned

the group briefly. The girls all looked very similar and were quite pretty, but superficially so, like images copied from the same source: objectively pleasing to view but, beneath, they lacked uniqueness or soul. Among them was the significantly older woman—the teacher. Her features were refined and elegant, with a hint of traditional beauty.

"Oh, it's you?" the prettiest girl in the middle called out in excitement, "Do you remember me? We took a selfie together at Miss T's club!"

Xie Lanshan stared at the girl's face, then recalled her.

"I forgot to introduce myself last time. My name is Peng Yixuan." The girl's large and pretty eyes scanned him. "Hey, how about you come and join us on the cruise?"

The older woman spoke up. "That might not be a good idea. You girls can't let a strange man—"

Rolling her eyes, Peng Yixuan interrupted her harshly. "That's none of your business. I know him, got it? Besides, you and Uncle Chang are here too. What do you think I invited you guys over here for—isn't it your job to keep an eye on us?" She turned back to Xie Lanshan, speaking to him with a completely different attitude. "Hey, pretty boy, aren't you a host? I'll pay you to join us on this cruise. Give me your rates."

The girl he'd run into earlier stared at him suspiciously but didn't question whether he was really a cop.

Xie Lanshan didn't plan on joining them. His last experience at a club had traumatized him enough. Three women were already enough to start a war. Seven could destroy the world. Besides, even if it was Saturday, the recent surge in meth-related crimes had kept him busy at work. The bureau was buried and often called for overtime, so he couldn't afford to join a cruise that might be out for a few days.

Peng Yixuan provoked him. "What, you're scared? Do the rules say you're not allowed to take private clients?"

Something about that line struck a chord with Xie Lanshan; he suddenly thought of his crush, Shen Liufei, and the spite jabbed at him from inside. He quickly ousted those thoughts and gave the young girls a handsome smile. "I hate following rules blindly."

Peng Yixuan grinned, walked up to Xie Lanshan, and wrapped her hands around the man as if it were only natural.

Xie Lanshan casually stepped aboard and studied the fancy ship, thinking to himself: *All right, maybe a short vacation wouldn't be so bad.*

The captain of the ship was the Uncle Chang Peng Yixuan had mentioned earlier; his full name was Chang Ming. The man was forty-five years old but very fit and large; his skin was a healthy tan from his extended career at sea, which had started when he'd received his cruising license at a young age. The

older woman was Peng Yixuan's tutor, Xiao Gu, though judging from Peng Yixuan's attitude, she treated the tutor more like a servant. There were no other crew members. The girls gathered privately on the ship, having all of the space they needed to enjoy themselves without restraint.

Xie Lanshan's decision to join was very unexpected and spontaneous. Unlike the girls, who had prepared with bags of luggage, Xie Lanshan had left his coat with his police badge in the car and boarded the ship with nothing on hand. He only felt slight unease about his situation.

As if she understood his concern, Peng Yixuan took him to the master bedroom inside the ship. She smiled sweetly at him. "I'm sure you've seen my brother on the news before; he's tall and handsome, about the same height and size as you. He left a lot of clothes. Many of them are new, so you can go ahead and choose what you like."

She opened the closet door, exposing a full wardrobe of luxury clothing.

Xie Lanshan had grown used to receiving looks of adoration from young women and even secretly enjoyed the attention. Under Peng Yixuan's gaze, he didn't hesitate to take clothes from Peng Cheng's closet, then walked into the bathroom to change.

Like the average person, Xie Lanshan had always dressed casually. He was used to T-shirts, button-ups, and hoodies; he never cared to utilize his good looks by dressing up. As soon as he changed into young Master Peng's clothing, he changed both inside and out.

No wonder why people often said clothes made the man. Even something as simple as a button-up shirt could easily change someone's air depending on the fabric and cut.

His hair had certainly grown out, and even though Tao Jun had condemned his current look multiple times, Xie Lanshan had procrastinated getting it cut. The longest section in the back already reached his shoulders. Xie Lanshan pulled a hair tie from the dressing room and tied it up into a small ponytail.

For a long while, he stared at the man in the mirror, feeling the face was both strange and familiar—almost nostalgic.

Xie Lanshan lifted his eyebrows slowly and then the corner of his lips. His eyes narrowed into a smile; his thick eyelashes trembled just ever so slightly as he blinked, sending the sweetest gaze through his eyes.

He fixed his expression until the handsome face in the mirror froze into the look most familiar to him—one that was nostalgic, noble, and charming. Nodding in satisfaction, Xie Lanshan walked out of the bathroom.

Peng Yixuan gasped loudly twice and looked into Xie Lanshan's eyes, then blushed brightly as if she were drunk.

She stared dumbly until she finally let out yet another gasp. "You—you look completely different... man, my brother's a camel compared to you!"

(iv)

The day before Xie Lanshan went on a cruise with a group of young girls, another girl by the name of Tao Jing from a public high school prepared to take an eight-hundred-meter run test in a physical education class. During the second loop around the campus's field, she suddenly jumped on the girl running in front of her like a mad beast. Inhuman cries spilling from her mouth, she leaned down and bit the girl's ear.

The bitten girl screamed in horror as fresh blood rolled down her ear and her neck. The rest of the schoolgirls surrounding them screeched as well; some stayed back, while others attempted to pull the two apart. Yet Tao Jing's thin and small body exploded with strength; she pushed her classmates away violently.

Even the experienced PE teacher, who had witnessed many catfights among young girls, had never seen such a horrific scene and rushed forward to break up the fight. The teacher, a 180-kilogram retired athlete, still had to apply himself to pry Tao Jing off the girl.

As soon as Tao Jing was pulled off, the teacher rushed to console the victim and check her wounds. Multiple hands pulled Tao Jing to the side. Howling and twitching, the girl plummeted to the ground a few seconds later—and stopped moving.

By the time the PE teacher turned Tao Jing faceup to check her pulse, she was no longer breathing. He quickly called 120 for an ambulance and attempted CPR, but the compressions yielded no results; by the time the ambulance came, she was already dead of hemorrhagic stroke and acute renal failure.

Suspecting Tao Jing had a history of epilepsy, the hospital asked her family members for details, but as they gasped from tears, Tao Jing's family claimed Tao Jing had always been a healthy child with no such medical history. Suspicious, the hospital quickly contacted the police on behalf of the family.

A more thorough autopsy revealed Tao Jing's actual cause of death: methamphetamine overdose.

Tao Jing had been a quiet and reserved young girl from an average middle-class family. Her grades were mediocre compared to her classmates, but she had the potential to get into a high-ranking college, so she'd always been hardworking. All the teachers in school and her classmates mentioned Tao Jing was a diligent student and a kindhearted young girl. According to her peers, she was soft-spoken—in other words, not someone who would voluntarily abuse illegal substances.

The news of deadly narcotics making their way onto school campuses was earth-shattering and stunned the entire country. The Provincial Department of Public Security and Antidrug Forces quickly got to work. The Special Forces Unit Blue Fox Commando sent in two elite narcotics agents to support the Hanhai City bureau's violent crimes unit.

The agents arrived swiftly; Liu Yanbo personally greeted the team as a show of sincerity and determination to solve the case as soon as possible. Both Tao Jun and Tao Longyue also joined him.

"They're from the provincial branch? So that's the team Senior Xie used to be on?" Ding Li stared curiously at her superiors. She'd heard this "Blue Fox" unit universally scared the daylights out of drug dealers—they were a young team with an average age of twenty-seven, but every skilled and elite member could handle a case on their own.

"Yeah, the captain is Sui Hong. He's virtually a legend—see, I'm not into idol worship, but I wouldn't hesitate to bow down to Sui Hong." Nodding, Tao Longyue grimly watched the two men walk into their unit's office.

Chi Jin and Ling Yun, the two visitors in question, wore distinct navy uniforms. Their model-like physiques were tall and fit, handsome and eye-catching. The two seemingly young men were direct subordinates of Sui Hong but were also experienced fighters who had been part of multinational drug-war cases numerous times.

Aside from the scar on his face, Tao Longyue was quite good-looking and had a clean appearance. Of course, this was only appropriate when compared to the average Joe. Facing the two Blue Fox agents, he felt his status threatened. Tao Longyue discreetly fixed his jacket, studying the elites from the provincial branch. Chi Jin had a sharp and cold expression, resembling Shen Liufei's aura. On the other hand, Ling Yun was like sunshine and gave off an amicable air even without a smile. Tao Longyue complained in his mind: *What antidrug narcotics force? They must've confused these guys with an idol group.*

Chi Jin scanned Tao Longyue and his team briefly. "Is the violent crimes unit here all so undisciplined?"

He was complaining the team dressed too casually. It couldn't be helped; the violent crimes unit spent most of their time investigating in casual attire. They had no need to wear uniforms, so naturally, no one particularly cared about maintaining appearances. Tao Longyue turned around to look at his teammates—the diligent Xiao Liang, the dependable Xiao Zhang, the brave Xiao Jiao...

Then he shifted his gaze to their desks, which were filled with files and paperwork, a half-eaten hamburger, unfinished soft drinks...

Perhaps these kids really were a little too unruly—though not because they weren't in uniform, but because the entire office had a lazy and undisciplined air. Everyone dressed as if they were at home and sat in bizarre positions. In contrast to the elite agents, the entire team seemed to be made up of hooligans.

To remind the young man to wipe off the salad dressing dripped on his shirt collar, Tao Longyue shot Xiao Liang a death glare, then turned to greet the two guests. "Sorry about that, Captain Chi. Our team is certainly a little easygoing, but when it comes to work, rest assured we will never slack off." Tao Longyue didn't mind offering lip service to the elites if he could stand up for the team he practically treated as family.

Chi Jin's expression remained cold. "Where's Xie Lanshan? I heard he came over to work as an investigator in your unit after he left the antidrug forces. How come he's not around?"

Tao Longyue only now realized he was speaking to someone who was acquainted with Xie Lanshan. Judging from his tone, they might even have been old teammates. "I don't know what's going on either. I haven't been able to contact him for a whole day. Let me give him a call right now." He asked Ding Li to continue reaching out to Xie Lanshan.

"No need." Chi Jin's tone dropped another degree. "I don't want to work with that rotten apple of a cop anyway."

Captain Tao didn't mind the elites having a higher standard for the people they worked with. The antidrug team had the highest death rate in all of China's police force. Every battle against the dealers was a life-or-death brawl, so every single one was an expert at hand-to-hand combat, but he couldn't stand listening to the man denounce his good friend. His expression darkened. "Captain Chi, I don't think that was an appropriate comment."

Even Ling Yun whispered quietly from beside him, "Chi Jin, watch your words."

By the time Ling Yun enlisted, Xie Lanshan had been transferred over, so he didn't know Xie Lanshan—but Chi Jin certainly did. They weren't simply acquaintances either—Chi Jin had followed Xie Lanshan to the cliff of the mountain. He'd witnessed Xie Lanshan's split second of hesitation with his own eyes—the very hesitation that had given Mu Kun's snipers time to shoot down their comrades and allowed the drug lord to escape in the helicopter.

After the operation, he was also the one who had reported to the higher-ups that Xie Lanshan purposely let Mu Kun escape.

Chi Jin might have been arrogant, but he had abundant experience fighting drugs and was an extremely efficient investigator. Without wasting any time on troublesome analysis and searches, he gave an objective outlook on the case: Education on drug abuse was widely taught in school campuses across

the country. In the case of an average high school student like poor Tao Jing, whose life consisted only of her family and school, she would have been conditioned to see drugs as dangerous temptations of the devil. Under normal circumstances, students like her would never voluntarily pick up illegal drugs, nor accept unknown substances from strangers—lambs instinctively avoid wolves, after all. However, they wouldn't be on guard in the face of their own kind. Therefore, she had likely been tricked by a fellow high school girl.

Chi Jin continued with his analysis: To first-time users, meth could be on par with a potent aphrodisiac. Therefore, his gut said these drugs had made their way into the community of teenage girls because another girl was secretly engaged in the underground trade. She would be the single point of connection stepping over the barrier to introduce drugs on the school campus —in other words, a wolf in sheep's clothing.

To find her, they would need to thoroughly investigate all her classmates, especially anyone who was suddenly spending excessively or hanging out at karaoke clubs or bars more often.

After listening to Chi Jin's analysis, Tao Longyue was speechless. Teenage girls nowadays sure were something—how were they able to get their hands on such dangerous substances?

Captain Tao had solved many murder and arson cases, and he had arrested a number of drug dealers along the way, but most of them were already wanted criminals. He'd never seen a teenage girl bold enough to bring drugs to school; it was a first during his entire time in the Hanhai City municipal bureau.

As such, he took it with a grain of salt, but Captain Tao abided by Chi Jin's theory regardless and asked Tao Jing's best friend about it. Surprisingly, something clicked, and she recalled a piece of information she had almost forgotten. A mysterious "beauty cure-all" had recently become popular among the high school girls. Rumor had it the wonder drug could help with weight loss, clear skin, and even increase stamina. In order to pass the eight-hundred-meter run, Tao Jing had asked a friend of a friend to get her the panacea.

As for who this friend of a friend was, the young girl had no idea.

Hanhai City was also known as the "Eastern Luminescent," so named because bars and karaoke clubs had flourished over the years, popping up steadily like sprouts of grass. Investigating the source of this mysterious drug was nearly impossible if their only clue was that they were looking for a "high school girl meth dealer." Regardless, with the hawk eyes of the leaders from within the bureau and the unmoving gazes of the public on them, the entire homicide and violent crime unit felt the pressure weighing on their shoulders.

(v)

Six high school girls were attending the cruise. As a teacher, Xiao Gu was especially cautious about the arrival of Xie Lanshan.

Xie Lanshan didn't bother explaining he was a cop. It was good enough the girls had mistaken him for a host. He happily tossed his identity as a law enforcement officer aside, enjoying his time in the private spa, massage room, and rooftop-inspired bar, all while keeping up with his exercise regimen. Under the golden sky of autumn and beside the grand waves of the sea, the man felt as if he was on vacation.

All eight people on the ship, including Xiao Gu, sat around a large table for dinner. The six young girls took turns to introduce themselves to Xie Lanshan like little ducklings waiting to show off their grown-up charm to the attractive young man. Peng Yixuan was the first to formally introduce herself and the most well-known. As the sole daughter of the famous Starex Group, everyone knew her name even if she never showed her face in public.

Zuo Ruoqi had introduced herself earlier. She was a transfer student, in the middle of her second year, and the newest member of this friend group. Despite being a newcomer, she seemed to have earned Peng Yixuan's trust and liking. Zuo Ruoqi was very timid and careful around Peng Yixuan—perhaps even a little scared.

The girls seemed close, but they were all from different grade levels and, though they smiled and chatted giddily, Xie Lanshan still caught on that the girls all revered and feared Peng Yixuan.

Xie Lanshan shifted his gaze to Zuo Ruoqi. Following around the table in clockwise order, he looked at a girl with short reddish hair. "What's your name?"

Peng Yixuan answered for her, "Qiu Fei, but because she's ugly, we all call her Fugly."

Xie Lanshan was surprised. With her tall and slender physique, the girl in front of him was nowhere near ugly. Even her outfit and demeanor exuded elegance and sophistication.

"You don't believe it? She used to look like a real pig before. She lost some weight and got some money to dress herself up." No matter whom she spoke to, Peng Yixuan's words were sharp and harsh. She turned to Qiu Fei. "Hey, you, make a little piggy face."

Qiu Fei actually did push up her nose and scrunch her face. The girls laughed.

"It's true. I was a fat pig before." Qiu Fei removed her hand from her face. She seemed to have a big heart and didn't mind the offensive nickname. As she lifted a few strands of her hair, she said, "Look at my hair—it's not colored. It's naturally like this. The doctor says it's because I'm zinc-deficient, though I think it's more like shame-deficient." She laughed at her own joke

and said to Xie Lanshan, “You can call me ‘Fugly’ too.”

Next in line was a pair of chummy cousins who called each other “sister” and “sis.” The older one was Yu Xin and the younger one Yu Yangzi. They looked quite similar, being that they were almost direct family, but they carried themselves quite differently. The older cousin was pretty and chic, while the younger one looked more average, though her smile was bright and sunny.

The elder one, Yu Xin, was a grade older than all of the other girls. She’d met Peng Yixuan in dance club during middle school and the two had quickly hit it off, so she’d become part of this group. She was supposed to be in college, but unfortunately, she’d bombed her high school exam and was held back a year.

The younger, Yu Yangzi, was also the youngest among the group.

The last girl had taken a break from school for a year because of severe type 1 diabetes and had only returned recently. Her name was Lu Weiwei. She was quite reserved and had a very faint smile on her face, which was thin and pale like a sickly patient’s. She was the quietest among them as well. According to the other girls, she also used to be part of the dance club and had won awards. If she hadn’t fallen ill, she would have had a bright future ahead of her.

Xiao Gu single-handedly took care of dinner for the crew—a pot of freshly cooked pork pot roast served alongside rice and stir-fried bamboo shoots with bitter melon.

The tutor placed the utensils down on the table. “There’s not a lot of food on the ship, so please don’t expect anything too fancy.”

Chang Ming walked into the dining hall from the captain’s lounge and ate with the girls. He seemed quite excited to see he wasn’t the only man on the ship. “Open up a bottle. I’ll have a few drinks with this young lad here.”

Peng Yixuan joined in giddily. “Good wine naturally goes with good guests—I should bring out my brother’s for a special day like this!”

Xiao Gu’s expression darkened as she turned to Chang Ming. “Stay put, you old drunkard. Drink on your own if you want, but we have a group of young girls with us. How can I let two adult men get wasted in front of them?” She was suspicious of and afraid Xie Lanshan might do something inappropriate while intoxicated.

Understanding her concern, Xie Lanshan smiled. “I don’t drink.”

Chang Ming helped himself to the food and wolfed down everything he had on his plate. After seeing no one else wanted to drink with him, he walked back into the captain’s lounge.

Peng Yixuan stopped after a few bites, complaining the bamboo shoots were too hard to chew, the bitter melon was too bitter, and that her mouth was filled with strange tastes. She brought up the idea of playing a game and splitting into two teams of four.

The game was common dinner table entertainment: everyone fanned out their hand on the table, then said something they'd once done that they believed none of their companions had. People who never had the stated experience would fold down one finger, while those who had wouldn't need to budge. Whoever lost their entire hand would lose the game, and the loser would be punished, of course. It was another form of truth or dare. Nothing creative, but a good icebreaker.

Unlike the young girls, Xiao Gu hadn't had a very eventful life—partying, clubbing, cheating on tests, and playing games were all unfamiliar to her. She quickly admitted defeat.

The winning team got to punish the loser. "Miss Xiao, truth or dare?"

Xiao Gu said, "I've never played this game before, so I'll choose truth." She was afraid the girls would take things too far with a dare.

Qiu Fei and Yu Yangzi were the first to complain. "Who cares about your story!" In other words, they didn't want to hang out with the old woman.

Hearing the boos from the girls, Xiao Gu changed her response and said, "Then I'll do a dare."

Peng Yixuan suddenly sneered. "Sure, dare it is. Strip off your clothes and go stand out on the deck." Her poisonous, dangerous gaze contrasted with her delicate, doll-like appearance. Xiao Gu was instantly stunned.

The young girls laughed sharply; Xiao Gu looked around cautiously like an innocent maiden who had stepped into a den of toxic spiders, unsure whether she should give in.

Perhaps the sickly one was the most benevolent. As the only girl who wasn't laughing, Lu Weiwei called out to stop the dare. "Yixuan, this is a bit too much for a game."

"Did you forget that story we read in Chinese class? The one with Hua Xin and Wang Lang on a boat." Peng Yixuan sneered, then explained, "Two people on the same boat save someone drowning in the waters. The benevolent one wants to help and bring the person on board, but the other opposed the idea because the boat was at its limit. One more person would mean they could all drown. The benevolent one scolded the second for being heartless and saved the drowning person. They eventually ran into a storm as they sailed, and the same benevolent one who wanted to save the drowning third person pushed the person back into the water to save themselves."

Peng Yixuan stared at Lu Weiwei and, as if to hint at something, said, "I never planned on helping the person, but you're even more disgusting than I

am."

Tripping over her own foot and landing on her face, Lu Weiwei clenched her fist; her whole body shook.

The storm lingering under the surface at the dinner table was apparent. *The friendship these girls have is all just a façade*, Xie Lanshan thought, his eyebrows furrowing slightly. The conflict between the two went beyond inappropriate table manners.

Yu Xin was a little older and knew Peng Yixuan longer, so she had the power to occasionally speak up. Yet she was quiet, like a silent artist reluctant to associate herself with the younger children.

Yu Yangzi, on the other hand, squinted at Xie Lanshan, mouthing soundlessly to him: *Lu Weiwei and Peng Yixuan fought over a boy before.*

Zuo Ruoqi, who hadn't spoken up often, suddenly said, "We're on a cruise to have some fun. Let's stop fighting. Are we still playing?"

The girls on the side did, in fact, look ready to break into a fight. Xie Lanshan took a slow sip of a nonalcoholic drink from his cup. Raising an eyebrow, he held up seven fingers from his two hands, then gave a dramatic sigh. "You're all women. There's no need to fight. Miss Xiao here has everything you girls have—why do you want to see a shirtless old woman? I'm still in the game, and I'll strip for you girls if I lose. I promise it'll be better than photos."

Xiao Gu couldn't stand their eyes and quickly left.

"I don't like her. She's always suspicious at home; if she isn't trying to steal something, she's trying to get in bed with my dad," Peng Yixuan fumed, then purposely said in a loud voice for Xiao Gu to hear, "Bitch!"

The girls were actually quite fond of Xiao Gu. Even if they wouldn't speak out against Peng Yixuan like Lu Weiwei had, their expressions gave away their opinions—they were warning Peng Yixuan to knock it off.

Only Yu Xin remained distant and withdrawn from everything that was happening.

Xie Lanshan was curious about her silence and asked, "Don't you have anything you want to say or do?"

"It's none of my business," Yu Xin remarked coldly.

Xie Lanshan said, "Well, she does take care of you and you even call her your teacher..."

"So what?" The girl's ego was strong, and completely uncaring. "It's not my business, even if she dies."

Xie Lanshan didn't continue the conversation. He only smiled and recited a poem in English:

First they came for the socialists
and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me
and there was no one left to speak for me.

His voice was deep but soft, and even if none of the girls knew enough English to understand the meaning of the poem, they were smitten by his voice. Only Yu Xin understood what he'd said when the first line was recited, and she knew that he was indirectly scolding her for her aloofness.

Yet just as she was about to voice her complaint, Zhou Ruoqi exclaimed, "All right, let's get back to the game!"

Despite the tension, Xie Lanshan's proposal was good bait, and served to rile up the young women's competitive spirit as they went to great lengths to make him lose.

"I've kissed a boy before." Qiu Fei turned to Xie Lanshan proudly, expecting him to bend back another finger.

The man's long and slender fingers didn't flinch—after all, he'd made out with Shen Liufei.

This completely unexpected turn of events made all the girls gasp in a gossipy tone. They quickly began questioning him to get the next scoop. "Who is it? Who? Who did you kiss?"

Xie Lanshan took this opportunity to vent his frustrations with Shen Liufei. "A stupid turtle who's got a perpetual shit-eating face."

Yu Xin chimed in, "Perpetual shit-eating face? So, like a cold beauty?"

Xie Lanshan laughed at the accurate description. "How did you get 'beauty' from a shit-eating turtle?"

"Likes attract, so a handsome man's boyfriend must also be handsome." Zuo Ruoqi moved her seat closer. "We want to hear the details. How did you guys kiss? How long? Was there tongue? Did you guys get in—"

"Agh—" Xie Lanshan choked on his drink. He covered his mouth and coughed before giving a slightly defeated smile. "So, my girls here are all into that BL thing, huh?"

"Not really. We have different levels of interest." Zuo Ruoqi gave him a sheepish smile. "I'm just down a little deeper in the pit."

"Oh, I'm in the same boat." Yu Yangzi leaned in closer, her round little face intent. "So now I wanna know. Have you guys done *it* yet?"

"Not yet." Xie Lanshan grinned brightly, giving what he hoped was an honest answer. "But soon."

The conversation had gone off the rails; the girls laughed, tilting their heads back and not caring about their loud voices or their image.

Quickly, they began firing full power at Xie Lanshan. By the time Yu Yangzi's turn came again, Xie Lanshan was down to one finger, but the round-

faced girl repeated a truth already mentioned in earlier rounds, saving Xie Lanshan.

Peng Yixuan scolded Yu Yangzi, “Is your damn head full of tofu? Didn’t your sister just say she had her first period already?” Yu Yangzi didn’t dare to fight back. Everyone aside from Lu Weiwei let Peng Yixuan go off with no consequences.

“Yixuan, don’t waste time on her. It’s your turn now.” Zuo Ruoqi was once again the mediator. “Here, you can say something wild and unexpected. Then you can make a-Lan take his shirt off—isn’t that enough?”

Of course, by this time, most everything she could say had already been listed, so Peng Yixuan fell into silence.

An enormous wave hit the cruise ship, making it shake. The warm light on the ceiling cast shadows on the young and pretty face.

Suddenly, Peng Yixuan said, “I’ve killed someone before.”

The enchanting magic of this sentence silenced the entire space. Peng Yixuan looked proud, but the rest of the girls wore strange, frozen expressions.

Xie Lanshan retracted his smile. This girl wasn’t simply making something up to scare the crowd.

(vi)

After a few minutes of silence, the rest of the girls all protested together, “No way! That’s such a blatant lie! Put more thought into what you’re saying!”

As if she’d realized she said something she shouldn’t have, Peng Yixuan’s attitude changed. She quickly insisted, “I’m kidding. There’s no way. All right, I guess it’s my loss this round.”

The game ended, and none of the other girls were in the mood to play another round. Toying with his butter knife half-heartedly, Xie Lanshan studied the girls.

Six girls, ages sixteen to seventeen, right at the prime of their innocent youths. Peng Yixuan was pretty, Zuo Ruoqi was cute, Qiu Fei had the finest body, Yu Xin was the most elegant, Yu Yangzi carried her camera everywhere, and Lu Weiwei was a sick young girl with a just heart. Yet after a few rounds of games, Peng Yixuan’s bright expression dimmed, Yu Yangzi wouldn’t meet his eyes, and Lu Weiwei kept her head down.

All six girls around the dinner table had sunk down into a strikingly different mood compared to the start of the game. As a bystander, Xie Lanshan grew suspicious and began to believe that the young women were hiding secrets.

Yu Yangzi, the cheerful one, tried to ease up the atmosphere. “Aren’t there board games on the ship? Let’s play some.”

Everyone agreed. Yu Yangzi nudged Zuo Ruoqi. “You go bring it over.”

Clearly, the group got to order around the newcomer, yet she didn’t seem to mind serving, carrying bags, and offering the others water.

Zuo Ruoqi brought over a large box; Yu Yangzi’s eyes lit up in excitement, noticing a pair of circular redwood objects, which had clearly been decorated by the hands of a master craftsman. Every detail was breathtakingly fine. She took one out; it was quite heavy. “Hey, these containers look nice. What are they for?”

Zuo Ruoqi corrected her, “It’s not a random container. It’s called a Go-kei; it holds stones for Go.”

Upon her lifting the cover, the clean black and white stone pieces revealed themselves.

Peng Yixuan glanced at it. “These were all crafted from Khotan Jade; the white ones are white jade, and the black ones are ink jade. If you break even one piece, you won’t be able to afford to replace it.”

Yu Yangzi’s hands shook, and she quickly put the containers down.

Qiu Fei asked, “Your brother knows how to play Go?”

Peng Yixuan shook her head. “Not my brother, my dad. He’s just a wannabe though, and only met a few pros during a guest game once, so he sort of pretends to be good at it.”

Yu Xin said, “I remember now—didn’t your dad also sponsor the city’s middle school Go tournament once?”

“Why are you always bringing him up, you hustler? If any of you know how to play Go, you guys can use his set.” Uninterested, Peng Yixuan remained grim, then she turned to Xie Lanshan, her face finally lifting into a little smile. “Do you know how to play?”

Xie Lanshan shook his head, and the rest of the girls followed suit. They knew nothing about it. Only Yu Xin knew how to play, as a level-six casual player—which meant she couldn’t even win against students in Go school or old people on the streetside.

“You can’t play Go with only one person. Besides, it’s a pretty boring game only old people enjoy,” Zuo Ruoqi said. “How about we share some new gossip we’ve heard lately?”

The girls began chatting like little birds, sharing stories from campus and venturing all the way into celebrity gossip. Most of these stories were baseless rumors.

Peng Yixuan was visibly annoyed. “These are all boring. I’ve had dinner with what’s-his-name before, and he admitted to me it was true.”

Yu Yangzi was the most curious one. “Oh, yeah, I saw news on a foreign website one day that this American military lab is doing human research on head-replacement surgery. The media dug out this top-secret experiment, so the testing is on indefinite hiatus—”

The story sounded more outlandish than Wuxia dramas on television, so the rest of the group started hollering at her before she finished, “Oh, please! You must’ve read that from *The Onion*!”

Yu Yangzi fought back. “Well, I think it’s true. Technology is advancing every day—did you think people a few hundred years back would even believe a heart transplant was possible? Besides, you know the Americans are always researching weird stuff. Didn’t you read rumors saying they’ve secretly been doing alien research for years?”

“But how would they even do that? Cut someone’s head off, spin it around, and then sew it back on the neck?”

“Then you’ll leave a scar around your whole neck, and if the stitches aren’t strong enough, your head would roll off again if you turn too quickly—gross.”

“I can believe that alien one. Go look up Area 51 in America. They’ve already captured aliens for research in that lab...”

The chatter continued as everyone discussed these stories like they were jokes. Lazily, Yu Xin rolled her eyes, then chimed in with a slightly superior tone of voice, “Of course these sorts of human experiments would be called off. It touches too close to that ancient moral dilemma—the ship of Theseus.”

Xie Lanshan had heard of this thought experiment once, but he still listened in to what the high school girl had to say.

Yu Xin explained, “In Greek mythology, the Athenians preserved Theseus’s ship after he returned from Crete, but over time, the wood began to rot, and they had to replace boards until the entire ship was made of fresh wood. Now the question becomes this—is it still the same ship Theseus sailed on?”

These philosophical discussions clearly couldn’t capture the interest of teenage girls. Everyone fell silent for a few seconds.

Then Yu Yangzi clapped in support. “Sis sure is an A student.”

Regardless of whether Yu Yangzi had ill intent, her comment almost sounded sarcastic. Yu Xin had good grades and was a great dancer, but her attitude was harsh at times, and she often spoke up to show off. She had been the one who started calling Qiu Fe “fugly.”

Qiu Fei, used to being the butt of the joke, found her opportunity to take revenge. “Sure, a straight-A student who has to repeat a year—and is older than everyone in her class.”

Like a cat whose tail had been stepped on, Yu Xin’s expression darkened. “At least I’m not uglier than everyone else. Nobody knows how you lost so much weight anyway. You better be careful or you might send yourself to

rehab."

Qiu Fei jumped up. "You think you can shit-talk me? Who seduced a teacher to get a copy of the mock test beforehand so they could breeze through the high school exam? Oh, right, but an anonymous person reported you, so your guaranteed grade went down the drain, and you even screwed up the actual test—"

Seeing another war about to break out, Lu Weiwei slammed her hands on the table and stood up. "I'm not feeling too well. I'm heading back to my room. If you all have time to fight over stupid stuff like this, you might as well all do the same!"

That put an end to Xie Lanshan's day chatting with teenage girls. As night fell, he sank deep into the communal tub of the spa. The silver light on the sea glistened, and the sweet and salty smell of ocean water filled the air.

Water had always comforted him, like he was a fetus returning to his mother's womb.

He wasn't sure if the youthful atmosphere had gotten to him, but as he closed his eyes, ten years faded away as easily as a breeze or raging tide. He recalled the summer of his second year in the police academy.

That day, he was lying on a grass field as relaxed as he was now inside the tub. The girl close to his heart was also lying on the grass, her head leaning on his shoulder. The warm sunlight cradled them in the lazy afternoon.

Song Qilian had just heard Xie Lanshan signed the authorization to donate his corpse after death. He didn't think much about it, but Song Qilian was worried—determining what would happen after his death before going on the front lines felt like a bad omen.

Xie Lanshan closed his eyes. "I wasn't the only one. All of my classmates signed it too."

Ever since Xie Lanshan had joined the police academy, Song Qilian felt like she didn't know him anymore. She said matter-of-factly, "Your dad died in the line of duty, and your mom fell ill because she lost him. This is just how normal people think. Why not find a more stable career and live a peaceful life?"

Xie Lanshan wasn't good at expressing himself. After pondering slightly, he laughed.

Song Qilian declared, "Sometimes I really don't understand you. You're both indifferent and tolerant of everything; I can't tell whether you care or not."

She'd enjoyed traveling to many places and had met many people, but no one like Xie Lanshan. To put it in a positive light, he was saintly but, put more bluntly, he was a stubborn fool. Still upset, she felt the young man was

yielding too much to everyone else's expectations. "If I could fight like you, I'd have beaten up Liu Mingfang by now. He's nothing but a kid flaunting his dad's prestige."

"It's because my dad reminds me I shouldn't every day."

"It's been years since your dad passed..." Song Qilian suddenly stopped herself, remembering how much Xie Lanshan respected his father. She swallowed the rest of the line—*how can he talk to you every day unless he's a ghost!*

Xie Lanshan seemed to know what she was going to say but didn't get upset. "Do you remember what you asked me in grade school? Why my dad gave me this name?"

Song Qilian knew where her name had come from. Her parents met during a trip on Qilian Mountain and had fallen in love after they returned. As for Xie Lanshan's name, she had her own answer. The young man's gaze was always warm and affectionate, like a gentle mist surrounding the mountains.

Xie Lanshan turned to look at Song Qilian. "To live tall and proud like a mountain, to embrace everything in the mortal world."

The moment Xie Lanshan looked over, Song Qilian also turned her head; only a tiny distance separated their lips. Flustered, Xie Lanshan quickly pulled back, thinking he had acted rashly.

In the end, Song Qilian was the one who leaned closer.

The rest of the scene fell out of his memories. The touch of their lips was nothing but a young fever dream.

Xie Lanshan opened his eyes. The young woman's face had turned into someone else's, someone who had been tugging on his heartstrings as of late —Shen Liufei.

Xie Lanshan jolted awake.

"Damn turtle." Xie Lanshan swore under his breath at both himself and Shen Liufei. He blamed the teenage girls for getting too excited during the day and cursed those indecent thoughts for following him into his subconscious. "Only stinky dumbasses would have a crush on you."

"What were you thinking earlier? You were all..." A young girl's giggle rang beside his ear—one that was sweet, charming, and remarkably similar to Peng Yixuan's voice.

Xie Lanshan opened his eyes. During that brief daydream, Peng Yixuan had snuck into the spa.

Her gaze falling on Xie Lanshan's lower body, Peng Yixuan lifted her eyebrow in interest. "Some nice assets you got there."

"Of course," Xie Lanshan responded without a flinch. He suddenly stood up and covered himself with a bathrobe beside him.

She attempted to seductively untie her own robe, but she was still just an inexperienced naughty teenager, making the attempt almost laughable. Xie Lanshan's mouth lifted into a faint smile as he grabbed Peng Yixuan. "I like to unwrap presents with my own hands."

As he finished, he leaned down and closed the distance between himself and the girl as though he were capturing his prey. Peng Yixuan admitted defeat but still took a few steps back, becoming trapped against the metal handrail beside the hot tub.

Xie Lanshan asked, "You said you killed someone before. Is that true?"

Peng Yixuan whispered into his ear, "What makes you think I'll tell you? Who do you think you are?" Xie Lanshan pulled a pair of handcuffs from the pocket of his bathrobe, but Peng Yixuan didn't panic, instead laughing. "I didn't know you were into this."

The man might have forgotten his badge in his car, but his equipment was still on hand. He pressed the cold metal of the handcuffs against the young girl's exposed ankles, then gently traced them up her legs. His gesture was gentle, feathering the young girl's heart until her breathing became frantic as she began to struggle.

The handcuff first captured the girl's wrist. Then, after another click, the other side closed around the metal handrail of the tub. The girl was trapped.

"I need to grab something, I'll be back soon." Xie Lanshan stood up and left, blowing Peng Yixuan a kiss.

As soon as he stepped out of the spa area, he let out a deep sigh—girls these days sure were out of control. Xie Lanshan had no interest in overly aggressive teenagers. For the sake of his sanity, he would leave the girl handcuffed to the tub all night and escape to his room.

Xie Lanshan walked toward the deck to get a breath of fresh air. A crescent moon embellished the night of golden autumn. A single ray of light shone down like a perfect stairway to heaven.

Then Captain Chang Ming quickly rushed out of the engine room from the lower deck of the ship.

"Is there something wrong with the ship?" Xie Lanshan called out casually, but Chang Ming jumped and shivered like a rabbit in response.

He saw Xie Lanshan behind him before letting out a sigh of relief, then scolded the guest, "What do you think you're doing out here in the middle of the night? Go back to your room!" He turned and left.

Chang Ming was an old friend of the Peng family, while Xie Lanshan was merely a guest. He couldn't argue back. He walked back into the main cabin, then looked out toward the deck.

Outside, Zuo Ruoqi and Qiu Fei were whispering quietly to each other.

This certainly wasn't a peaceful ship. Everyone had their own secrets. Returning to the main cabin, Xie Lanshan fell onto the sofa in fatigue and fell deep asleep.

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He slept soundly until sunrise. The ship sailed smoothly, almost as though they weren't even on water. No wonder why some people claimed the ocean was the cradle of life; Xie Lanshan hadn't gotten such good sleep in a long while. The ship sailed so smoothly he could forget he was even on the ocean.

Outside the window of the VIP room was a beautiful view of the surface of the sea: tranquil like a mirror, occasionally turning a few small waves and white bubbles under the sun. A chord inside Xie Lanshan trembled at this view of the azure and white world. As he stared curiously at the ocean for a long while, something inside him slowly awakened from this voiceless conversation with nature.

He got out of bed and washed. As soon as he splashed a handful of clear water onto his face, he heard a loud shriek.

Determining the screech had come from the direction of the spa, Xie Lanshan's heart skipped a beat. He had purposely left Peng Yixuan locked to the hot tub all night to discipline her.

Xie Lanshan quickly rushed over to where the girls had gathered. Then another loud shriek pierced his ears.

Peng Yixuan was still locked to the metal handrail. A knife lay close by on the marble flooring. Her white skirt was covered in blood, which seeped into the tub water by her feet.

Xie Lanshan was stunned and unable to move a finger. He should have been the first to check if Peng Yixuan was still alive, but this scene overlapped with that bloody nightmare, triggering those fragments of memories within him.

He could even see Zhuo Tian calling his name desperately, her face full of tears—but she wasn't calling him Xie Lanshan—instead, it was a different name, one that sounded like "Ye Shen."

Xie Lanshan fell into a daze. In the dream, he had killed this girl with his own hands, so who was this "Ye Shen" person with such a strange name?

Xiao Gu's desperate cries echoed in Xie Lanshan's ears. "Uncuff her first and see if we can still save her—where's the key? Does anyone know where the key is?"

You weren't the killer, but you were a silent accomplice. If he hadn't cuffed Peng Yixuan last night, this wouldn't have happened. The wave of regret on top of his awful headache almost made him lose his balance. Struggling to pull

out the key from his pocket, he said softly through his heavy breathing, “The key... the key’s with me.”

Xie Lanshan handed over the key and attempted to check Peng Yixuan’s corpse, but the girls blocked his way.

Pointing at him, Qiu Fei screeched, “It was you! You killed Yixuan!”

The rest of the girls screamed, “It’s you! It must be!”

The screeching exploded in his head; Xie Lanshan attempted to explain through the throbbing pain. “Calm down. I’m a cop. I didn’t kill anyone.”

Xie Lanshan turned toward Zuo Ruoqi in hopes of some support, but Zuo Ruoqi backed away toward Xiao Gu, the only other adult present. She hid behind the older woman and stuttered, her face deathly pale, “He—he crashed into me and lied that he was a cop...”

Great, now he had no way out. Lu Weiwei picked up the knife beside Peng Yixuan, waving it at Xie Lanshan despite the distance between them. During this mad swinging episode, she almost stabbed Yu Yangzi.

Xiao Gu took the knife from Lu Weiwei’s hands, then kept the girls behind her like a hen guarding her baby chicks. She was a teacher, so protecting these children at a time like this was her duty. Xiao Gu called out loudly toward the cockpit, “Chang Ming! Chang Ming, come here, quick!”

But the captain didn’t seem to have heard.

Without the protection of the other adult man on the ship, Qiu Fei cried out again in horror, “We shouldn’t have let him on the ship—he’s going to kill us all! Every one of us!”

With no way to convince them, Xie Lanshan was afraid even a little gesture would trigger more panic in the girls. He had no choice but to help them calm down.

“Why should we trust you? Unless...” Yu Xin lowered her head and scanned the area, then noticed the handcuffs Zuo Ruoqi held. She tossed them toward Xie Lanshan. “Cuff yourself, and then we might believe you.”

While her sister spoke, Yu Yangzi snuck out and returned with a fire hatchet. At the sight of the weapon, the girls panicked afresh, some hoping to take the hatchet while others scrambled for the knife.

“Don’t touch these dangerous weapons—you might hurt yourselves!” Xie Lanshan called out at this chaotic and dangerous scene. “All right! I can cuff myself if you guys promise to calm down.”

He placed the handcuffs on his own wrists and locked them.

Xie Lanshan’s action certainly earned a bit of Xiao Gu’s trust, but the teacher was well aware that she had five innocent lives in her hands. She didn’t dare step forward. “I’m also very confused right now, but since you’re the only outsider here, we apologize in advance. Please stay inside the storage room; let me talk to Old Chang to see what we’ll do from here.”

Shaking his head helplessly, Xie Lanshan gave Peng Yixuan's corpse one more glance. Excuses were no use, and he couldn't possibly harm these teenage girls, so he could only wait until they calmed down before figuring out the next step. He also wanted some time to himself to go over the events of last night, hoping to figure out the potential culprit. He walked down to the bottom of the ship on his own.

Locked inside the storage room, Xie Lanshan sat blankly for a while before pulling himself out of a daze. Something was off. There was blood on the handcuffs. Lowering his head, he sniffed it—then found it seemed awfully sweet. He licked a drop. It was just sugar.

The color of the blood also wasn't quite correct, but he hadn't caught it earlier.

Xie Lanshan squeezed himself over to look outside through the small window. A few seagulls glided over the surface of the ocean. Birds were always free, while the common man was tied up all around. Xie Lanshan couldn't help but laugh. Wetting his lips, he checked his current surroundings. The awkward space crammed full of other items was barely large enough to fit a person; a strange smell invaded his nostrils.

After a while, he decided to blame it on Shen Liufei. "You stinky bitch, it's your fault for screwing with my head and clouding my judgment!"

The moment the man was locked inside the storage room, Peng Yixuan opened her eyes. She scanned her surroundings, her red lips curled into a smile, and she laughed.

The rest of the girls gasped. Only Zuo Ruoqi and Qiu Fei had known about the plan; everyone else was kept in the dark.

The blood on the floor was the fake kind used in films. Peng Yixuan had never been tossed aside like this in her life, and when the little miss got angry, she decided to take her revenge. She crawled to set herself upright. "This was left on the ship last time my brother took that opera singer on board. I have another pack in my room. I was planning on toying with him for a few days, but it's his loss for giving me the cold shoulder. Let him stay in storage."

The pretty gal had a sweet smile brighter than the stars in the sky, yet at this very moment, the pride of a dictator marred her face. The joy of revenge, the satisfaction of venting her hatred, the disappointment in not having her wish fulfilled... these strange and complex emotions merged into an unfathomable expression, a single horrific, ugly image.

Regardless, her prank had succeeded. Peng Yixuan smiled once again, prettier than before, and patted Zuo Ruoqi on the face. She praised the newcomer, "Good acting back there."

Xiao Gu stood blankly on the side. She'd really thought the girl was dead. After a while, she scolded the teenager sternly, "How could you pull a prank like this? I was this close to stabbing Mr. Xie with a knife!"

"Why do you care? Aren't you just a nanny?" Peng Yixuan said without breaking a sweat. "Stop sticking your nose everywhere. Go make breakfast, and don't forget who's paying your salary."

The girls quickly fell back into boredom after locking Xie Lanshan inside the storage room.

Qiu Fei said, "I'm so bored. Why does it feel like the ship hasn't even moved?" She pulled her cell phone out, but there was no signal at sea.

Yu Yangzi put her camera away. "There still isn't Wi-Fi on cruises nowadays? I have some shows I want to catch up on."

Peng Yixuan was also surprised. "I don't know. We're supposed to have satellite internet here."

In the age of the internet, nobody would voluntarily strand themselves on a lone island without signal. The *Starglow*'s satellite modem, only slightly larger than a standard household one, connected to a satellite that could reach landline signals. Yet for some reason, this little box wasn't working.

The group was bored. Zuo Ruoqi suggested, "Maybe it broke. Let's ask Uncle Chang to fix it for us."

The girls quickly walked into the cockpit, but Chang Ming was lying still on the steering wheel.

The Peng family and Chang Ming were old friends. Chang Ming started off as Peng Hongbin's personal driver, then later acquired his ferry license to sail for Peng Cheng. Peng Yixuan had always called Chang Ming "Uncle Chang" and knew the old man didn't have fancy interests aside from an occasional drink. The man had always carried a flask around him like an old English sailor.

She walked over to Chang Ming, saw the empty wine bottle, and clicked her tongue. She called beside his ear, "Uncle Chang, wake up. Help us check the modem. Why can't we get online?"

Chang Ming still didn't move.

Seeming to lose her cool, Peng Yixuan took a step back, then let Qiu Fei and Zuo Ruoqi turn the man over.

His eyes were popped out in an expression of shock. A knife stuck straight out of his chest. The man was dead.

Hand to Hand, Back to Back

It was Monday at the Hanhai City municipal bureau. As usual, Old Li arrived at his security office early in the morning. He discovered a package resting outside of his office window with a note written on the box:

Please ensure this package is personally delivered to Captain Tao Longyue of the violent crimes unit.

The words were printed neatly and clearly like a typewriter had written them.

Instantly alert, Old Li reported the package to another guard before deciding to send it to Captain Tao, as requested.

He rushed into the violent crimes unit office and opened Captain Tao's door. "Captain Tao, there's a package for you."

Captain Tao had just survived a long and dreadful all-nighter. The captain's hair was messy, his eyes red from lack of sleep, and stubble grew from his chin like weeds. Even that fearsome scar on his head looked fatigued. Cursing, he searched through documents. "Xie Lanshan, you piece of shit, where the hell did you go now?!" He was used to discussing cases at work with his buddy, but he hadn't been able to contact the man.

Tao Longyue rubbed his tired eyes and said to Old Li, "Thanks. Just leave it there. I'll take a look at it later."

Old Li turned to remind him before leaving, "This thing looks suspicious, Captain Tao. You should be careful."

No one could fault Captain Tao for not taking the initiative or letting his attention lapse. He had spent the whole weekend investigating with the team from the provincial branch. Working more diligently than a beaver, he'd pulled two all-nighters with less than three hours of total sleep over the last two days.

After Old Li left, Tao Longyue checked for missing clues around the area. He searched through the entertainment businesses within Hanhai City a little more until his eyelids twitched, then remembered the package waiting for him on his desk.

With the intention of relieving some stress, Tao Longyue ripped open the box. He pulled out a letter along with a handful of photos. A long missive was quite refreshing these days, especially with such neat and refined handwriting. Captain Tao's interest was piqued; he read it carefully.

Dear Captain Tao Longyue, please excuse me for writing you this letter after seeing your name on the news...

The first line began with a very courteous and friendly greeting from one Yao Shuxin. He very carefully detailed his personal background, including his ID and even a certification of his engineering degree.

I am an average chemical engineer at a laboratory. Four years ago, my second-year middle school daughter Yao Yao went missing. I believe her disappearance was connected to a few of her classmates.

The man listed a few names. Tao Longyue recognized one: Peng Yixuan. After digging through his memories, he remembered that she was the daughter of the Starex Group CEO.

After three years of secret investigation on my own, I can confirm these seemingly innocent young girls all have dark secrets. Thus, I've taken a few photos in hopes they can assist you in future investigations.

Tao Longyue placed the letter down and picked up the photos of the six different girls. Judging by the backgrounds, these were not taken at the same time. Some were taken on the girls' way to school, others on their way home, hanging out with friends, or even kissing a boy... all were taken from very discreet angles, and clearly voyeuristic.

A middle-aged man spent three whole years stalking and secretly taking photos of these six young girls? This abnormal behavior gave Tao Longyue goosebumps. A sense of foreboding rose within him.

He continued reading. Yao Shuxin claimed that because he couldn't confirm which of these girls was responsible for the disappearance of his daughter, he'd decided to trap them all on a cruise ship.

Captain Tao, I would also like for you to help me find my daughter, but I must apologize. Because I am running out of time due to a terminal illness, I can only give you and your team seven days. Regardless of whether she is alive or not, I need to know what has happened to her. I must see my Yao Yao once more before my time is up.

Of course, in order to ensure you and your team place a higher priority on this investigation request, I have decided to give you an incentive. Starting the moment you receive this letter, I will kill one of the girls each day. I have utilized my work experience and placed homemade bombs on the ship. If I do not receive the answer I am seeking by the seventh day, I will blow up the entire ship. My deepest sympathies for all the parents; I'm sure no parent would be willing to experience the pain of losing their child without even seeing a piece of their corpse. I would also like to remind you to not attempt to send a helicopter to conduct a rescue mission. The sky is as vast as the sea. If I discover any abnormalities, I will set off the bomb early.

I hope you can understand and sympathize with this old father's love for his daughter and his grief for the loss of his flesh and blood. Therefore, I've sent a few dozen copies of this letter to all major media outlets across the country. Perhaps just as you're reading this, all of China will already know of my humble little request...

Tao Longyue slammed the letter onto his desk. This wasn't simply a stalker or peeping Tom: he was an absolute madman!

The letter was written very politely throughout; even the end was marked with a sincere note, yet the content and intent were clearly malicious, forcing the municipal bureau to conduct a seven-day investigation under the eyes of the entire country. Any misstep could potentially ruin the entire bureau's reputation.

Xie Lanshan's civilian shooting a few months ago still was influencing public opinion, but Captain Tao didn't focus on that. This thin piece of paper threatened six innocent lives. Even if it was an elaborate prank, it couldn't be overlooked. He pulled out two photos and tossed them onto Xiao Liang's desk, then howled at Ding Li, "You two, drop what you're doing right now and go investigate the school these two girls go to!"

Eating breakfast, Ding Li spoke with her mouth still full. "Bombs on a ship? No way. This isn't America—where could people possibly even get their hands on guns and ammo?"

Captain Tao stiffened, his voice clear and loud. "No way? This Yao Shuxin is an expert chemical engineer researching advanced emulsion explosives and millisecond detonators—you're telling me he can't possibly build something?!"

Realizing the severity of the situation, the two tossed their work and breakfast aside, then headed off to investigate.

Sitting back down at his desk, Tao Longyue picked up the rest of the photos, studying them all one by one.

The content of these photos was not merely personal—it was extremely dangerous. A long-haired girl kissed a middle-aged man old enough to be her father in one. In another, a girl with short red hair held out something from her pocket to another girl.

Tao Longyue noticed instantly that the girl being sold something in that second photo was Tao Jing, who had just died of a meth overdose.

Normally, he would have called up Xie Lanshan to discuss the case. However, there was no time to spare. He couldn't wait for Xie Lanshan to respond. He finally decided Shen Liufei would be the most reliable ally.

(ii)

Finding a lead didn't take long. After a brief investigation, they identified the girl selling Tao Jing meth as a third-year from the St. Noe All-Girls High School—Qiu Fei. Captain Tao quickly took his team to pay the school a visit. The teachers confirmed all six girls had left without calling in for absence.

Peng Yixuan wasn't simply a famous figure in school; fellow students followed her every move with eyes full of envy and hatred. As soon as they saw the police, they shared stories without hesitation. Peng Yixuan had taken the five girls out on a trip on her family's cruise ship and was expected to return over the weekend.

The story matched Yao Shuxin's letter. Alarm blaring inside Tao Longyue's head, he quickly rushed to the Peng household with Shen Liufei.

The Peng family lived in a newly developed community for the tech industry known as China's Silicon Valley. The cost of living was extremely high; some private gardens were estimated to be worth billions of yuan. The Peng household was a private mansion beside the riverbank, a fancy and traditional Chinese layout standing proudly atop its neighbors with unique architectural designs. A red double rose in a minimalistic style adorned the bamboo fence. The day was cloudy; a thin layer of mist above the surface of the river blended the sky and water together like a real-life calligraphy painting.

After hearing Captain Tao's reason, the nanny gave a soft welcome in an unfamiliar dialect and invited the guests into the study.

The eldest Peng child happened to be at home. Peng Cheng was the only son of the famous businessman Peng Hongbin. His mother was a movie star named Cheng Ya, who'd had her share of fame in the past. Now retired, she focused on caring for the household. The siblings took after their mother; Peng Cheng had a tall nose and large eyes on a thin face, making him no less handsome than a silver-screen star. He wore a light pink button-up and sat behind his desk, greeting the two visitors with his gaze.

"Have a seat." Peng Cheng pulled out a cigar. "Would you two like one?"

"No thanks," Shen Liufei said. "Cohibas are too strong in both taste and smell."

A flicker of interest flashed across young Master Peng's eyes. "Oh? You're quite a cultured one, I see."

Shen Liufei said mildly, "I've already quit."

The young master pinched the head of the cigar and turned it slowly to warm it for lighting.

He placed the cigar in his mouth and puffed clouds of smoke. An elegant, rich master's aura surrounded him. Peng Cheng leaned back in his chair, held the cigar between his fingers, and raised an eyebrow. He said lazily to his guests, "All right, just get to the point; I'm quite busy."

Tao Longyue stared at the man and thought, *This young Master Peng has a very similar aura to Xie Lanshan.*

As soon as it arose, the thought baffled him. Xie Lanshan was a real camel, and boring to the core. What kind of joke was that—comparing him to this young scion?

Tao Longyue said, "Your cruise ship might have gotten involved with a kidnapping case, so we need you to provide us with some information."

Peng Cheng raised an eyebrow. "I have three ships. Which one are you talking about?"

Shen Liufei showed the letter from Yao Shuxin to the young master. "The one your sister Peng Yixuan took out for her vacation."

Frowning, Peng Cheng scanned the letter quickly. "That's the *Starglow*. The ship's mine, but it was Yixuan's eighteenth birthday this Sunday, and she kept bugging me to let her borrow it, so I agreed to let her take her friends on a cruise for the weekend."

Tao Longyue was shocked. "And you're okay with letting a group of sixteen- and seventeen-year-old girls out on their own?"

Peng Cheng chuckled. "The captain's Chang Ming, an old friend of our family. The guy's pretty decent, and we also invited Yixuan's home tutor, Xiao Gu. With two adults on the ship, there's nothing to worry about." The siblings had a significant age difference, so they weren't particularly close.

Tao Longyue said, "So there's also a teacher on board, making a total of eight people on the ship?"

Peng Cheng glanced at Tao Longyue. "That's right, eight. If you're not good with math, you can count with your fingers."

Tao Longyue suppressed his annoyance. "Do you recognize the name Yao Shuxin?"

Peng Cheng said confidently, "No."

Tao Longyue stared at Peng Cheng, intending to find a trace of the truth. "We discovered from our investigation that the Starex Group had once employed him, but he quit after his daughter went missing. You've also been in a conflict with him once, to the point of calling the cops."

"Oh, right, that does sound like something that happened years ago." Peng Cheng inhaled another breath of cigar smoke and blew out a cloud. "I was busy all day with big business. I don't recall trifling details. Whatever you guys have on record is probably what happened."

Ding Li had already pulled up Yao Shuxin's profile and information. The man hadn't lied—at least, not about his background and identity. After his daughter went missing, he'd called the cops and harassed Peng Yixuan, eventually leading to a physical confrontation with Peng Cheng. The Peng family couldn't stand the trouble and finally called the cops, who concluded

Yao Yao was a runaway.

In the face of Captain Tao's aggressive questioning, Peng Cheng laughed. He didn't seem to believe his sister was in danger. "I don't think you guys know my sister that well; she may look pretty on the outside, but she has a twisted heart. She has always been a troublemaker since she was little and used it as a way to gain attention. It's partially my dad's fault too. He spoiled her too much. You guys don't need to pay too much attention to this letter. I bet this whole kidnapping scenario is just another one of her elaborate pranks."

Shen Liufei suddenly asked, "Do you know Yao Yao?"

Peng Cheng lifted his eyes to look at Shen Liufei and blew out another cloud of smoke. "No."

Tao Longyue still had questions, but Shen Liufei was ready to leave. "We're done now. Please excuse us." As soon as the last syllable dropped, he turned and left the study.

After stepping out of the house, Tao Longyue called out to Shen Liufei, "What's the rush? I wasn't done questioning him."

"He's lying. We only have 168 hours, and it's already been 14 since we received the letter. There's no need to waste time on someone who doesn't intend to be honest." Turning, Shen Liufei arranged the next steps of investigation for the dumbfounded Captain Tao. "Let's head over to the private ferry committee's headquarters to see if the *Starglow* cruise left any clues."

Hah, this guy sure thinks he's hot stuff now, Tao Longyue thought, but Shen Liufei strolled off without wasting a second while Tao Longyue mumbled to himself, following behind. "Hey, wait for me!"

Before he could even find the staff on duty at the ferry committee, an argument between a man and woman immediately stole Captain Tao's attention. One cursed in a heavy Beijing accent, while the other blasted words in a Southern dialect. The bickering echoed loudly: the man's voice like a machine gun, spewing out words, while the woman's high-pitched wails were like an opera singer as they became louder and louder with every line.

A white Hummer was parked behind the man, and another finely dressed woman stood beside him. The two pushed back on the middle-aged woman arguing with them; a small crowd of pedestrians and even traffic police surrounded the scene.

Captain Tao flashed his badge and asked the twenty-something traffic officer, "What's going on?"

As if a savior had descended, the young traffic cop summarized the event. The middle-aged woman had taken the man's parking space. Normally, such a problem could easily be solved by moving the car elsewhere when asked, but

the people who could afford ferries weren't average citizens, and both parties had big egos. First, the middle-aged woman cursed and upset the man, then he'd crashed his heavy Hummer into the woman's sports car, denting it.

The Hummer driver heard the officer explaining the events and rushed forward. Noting Tao Longyue's disciplined yet strangely fearsome demeanor —highlighted by that large scar on his forehead—he quickly pulled the man over. "Are you the boss?"

"Captain of the violent crimes and homicide unit."

"So you *are* the boss!" The man pulled the pity card, pointing at his scratched face. "That old bitch started it. Look, sir! She even scratched my face!"

"Don't you try and twist the truth!" The middle-aged woman didn't back down, grabbing Tao Longyue's other arm. "I scratched him because he hit my car!"

"You think I would hit your car if you hadn't made a damn scene? I swear if you try and pull another one, I'll personally crush you next!"

"That's enough!" Clearing his throat, Tao Longyue asked the middle-aged woman, "Why did you park in his parking space anyway? Regardless of whether you're here to park your personal ferry or a rental, shouldn't members have designated spaces?"

The man pointed at the woman's face. "That's right, this bitch parked in my spot!"

Glaring back, Tao Longyue raised his voice. "I told you, enough is enough. One more word and I'll let you yell all you want at the police station!"

The woman explained, "My parking space was taken. I'm not here for a vacation today: it's for work, so I figured I could park somewhere for a little bit and leave after I'm done."

After another round of loud debate, he followed the officer to the woman's space and finally discovered the true culprit.

It was Xie Lanshan's car.

The charade ended with no serious injuries, as the arguing parties could more than afford to fix the totaled car. The young traffic officer took the man and woman aside to settle the dispute, leaving Tao Longyue deep in thought: *Why is Xie Lanshan's car parked at a place like this?*

Ever since he had begun suffering at the hands of Chi Jin from the provincial bureau, everything around him had begun to irk Captain Tao, so caught up with the case, he had little time to care for this unreliable old friend of his. After considering the situation, he realized something was off. Xie Lanshan was indeed unreliable at times, but he would never leave anyone hanging. He wouldn't ignore his phone right before a huge case and vanish

into thin air. Discovering his car here meant something was wrong.

Tao Longyue said to Shen Liufei, “Don’t tell me the guy got into serious trouble.”

“He’s a grown man—what could possibly happen to him?” Shen Liufei’s voice was calm, but his eyebrows furrowed. “Don’t make assumptions. Call over some staff and ask what happened.”

They quickly found a staffer who explained the owner of the car arrived a few days ago with an injured young lady. The staffer allowed him to park because the man was a cop, but he later went on a cruise with the young girl.

“He got on a cruise with an injured young girl?” Shen Liufei asked. “Do you recall which cruise ship?”

The staffer nodded. “The *Starglow*. Little Miss Peng from the Starex Group was boarding that day, so we were all told to do a thorough safety check on the ship the day before.”

To prevent unnecessary mass panic, the municipal bureau had urgently called all major media outlets and internet providers to hold off reporting Yao Shuxin’s letter. Presently, the kidnapping hadn’t made its way to the news.

Tao Longyue stiffened up. The situation had made a turn for the worse. “Can you confirm the owner of this car actually boarded the ship with the girls? Is it possible you made a mistake?”

“How could I forget?” The staff member laughed. “That’s the *Starglow* we’re talking about, the most luxurious ship we have. Of course all eyes were on it when it sailed off. Besides, that man was even handsomer than a movie star; at least nine out of ten people here had their eyes on him. Do you think all of us could have possibly mistaken what we saw?”

After asking a few more questions, Captain Tao released the staff member.

“You think a-Lan is really on that ship?” Tao Longyue shot a glance at Shen Liufei, receiving confirmation from those muddied eyes. He took in a breath of cold air. “What kind of cursed luck is this? How come he keeps getting himself involved in these huge, dangerous cases?!”

Shen Liufei’s blank face slowly turned into a frown; he blinked. “It might not be as bad as we think. At least there’s a cop watching over the girls while they’re in danger.”

He let out a faint sigh. For a split second, he swore he couldn’t hear his own heartbeat. Finally, he managed to catch his breath. In face of the current situation, he couldn’t tell whether he was relieved or worried.

The girl who went missing four years ago, Yao Yao, went to the same middle school as four of the girls on the cruise. If she hadn’t disappeared, she would have attended the same high school in the city, but she couldn’t have known Zuo Ruoqi and Yu Yangzi because one transferred over to the high

school in her second year, while the other went to a completely different middle school.

Despite being in the same class, Peng Yixuan didn't interact with Yao Yao very often, and their clubs and extracurriculars were completely different. Peng Yixuan's small group mostly were interested in dancing, while Yao Yao joined the Go club, which was a particularly niche interest.

Before the girl went missing, she often skipped class because of her failing grades. Yao Shuxin had once checked his daughter's chat history, discovering his daughter had a very close relationship with a boy by the internet name of Fan Xipin. The two would often play Go online and chat about anything and everything in their private game rooms. Words like "love" and "cute" often appeared in their messages.

Yao Shuxin spent most of his life working in chemical engineering, as his wife had long left him for someone else. Raising a child was difficult enough for a single father, but his heart would melt for his daughter as quickly as he would hit her when he got upset.

After a harsh beating from her father, Yao Yao had gone missing. The last message she left on the internet before she disappeared was, *Fan Xipin, I will be like a free bird and fly courageously to your side.*

The police had determined Yao Yao left her house voluntarily, due to an internet love affair. Not only did the girl leave this message, neighbors had also said they'd seen her skip class the day she went missing. She cleaned up her belongings and left the house with luggage in hand.

After that, Fan Xipin never appeared online. The IP address matched an internet café near Zhuolan Middle School, a traditionally low-income public school, which was incomparable to Yao Yao's prestigious St. Noe All-Girls School. To make the most money off the students, the owner of the café never checked their IDs, nor used actual surveillance cameras.

The police in charge of the case did check the school and paid visits to the few businesses, factories, and even construction sites around the internet café to confirm Fan Xipin didn't exist.

Regretting his actions, Yao Shuxin had once again looked back at his daughter's chat history only to discover another horrible truth: her classmate, Peng Yixuan, had bullied his daughter. Peng Yixuan had even threatened to ruin Yao Yao's father's career if Yao Yao told any teachers.

At that moment, he recalled his daughter often had bruises, but every time he asked about them, she would defensively say she hurt herself during PE class. Any more aggressive questioning would make the young girl cry.

Yao Shuxin thus believed Peng Yixuan and her group of friends bullied his daughter, forcing her to leave home. Once, he even had a depressing thought —perhaps his daughter had already committed suicide somewhere no one

could find her.

At the time, the homeroom teacher refuted Yao Shuxin's suspicion, claiming his daughter wasn't a good target for bullies. Yao Yao was austere and didn't excel in her studies nor was she especially pretty. The only thing she really excelled in was Go. She was kind and gentle with slightly above-average attention to detail, but the girl with shoulder-length hair always kept her head down and distanced herself from her classmates.

Peng Yixuan was different. She was the rising star of a rich family, and a pretty young lady with a sweet mouth. She had good grades and a talent for dance. She was the moon up in the sky while Yao Yao was the earthworm hiding beneath the ground. Why would a swan fight over food with an ugly duckling?

But Yao Shuxin refused to believe he was the reason why his daughter had left, so he'd brought trouble with him into the Peng household. The local authorities sympathized with the man who'd lost his daughter and simply gave him a warning without formally writing it in his record. Despite that, Yao Shuxin's actions became increasingly extreme until he was finally taken to a detention center. Upon his release, Yao Shuxin threatened to make sure the Peng family paid for everything.

Then the man had vanished.

Shen Liufei pulled out all of this information from old files. He turned to Tao Longyue and asked, "Peng Yixuan's from a very well-off family. Is it possible that the homeroom teacher was bribed into covering something up?"

"The cop in charge of the case at the time already looked into it. The teacher was the lead researcher in linguistic studies and a key faculty member. Plenty of parents have tried to bribe her in the past, but she's never accepted any of the gifts nor did she ever tutor students privately outside of working hours. She's clean as a sheet of blank paper."

Deep in thought, he sat before his desk, eyes glued on the computer screen.

"Yao Shuxin's letters were delivered through express mail; he never showed his face. Was he already hiding on the *Starglow* or somewhere in the city? And did he send a helper to hide among the eight people on the ship?" Tao Longyue asked. He didn't receive a response from Shen Liufei and continued, "According to that homeroom teacher, the police report gave a reasonable analysis. Yao Yao probably had left home on her own. They searched for the missing child, but couldn't find a trace of her. Sure, Yao Shuxin deserved to be detained for his later actions, but Peng Cheng clearly has something to hide. Is there more to the story we haven't uncovered?"

Shen Liufei rubbed his temples and got up from his seat. He turned to Tao Longyue and said, "I'm going to pay St. Noe a visit while classes are still in session."

“Do you need me to go with you?” the captain asked.

“No need,” Shen Liufei answered.

In the faculty office of St. Noe Middle School, Shen Liufei was greeted by the girls’ former homeroom teacher, Mei Shumin. Mrs. Mei donned a neatly combed hairstyle and still looked rather strict and spirited for a woman in her midfifties. She was scolding a male student even after class was over—the student seemed to have insulted the school custodian and had even gone as far as to break a broomstick.

The student fought back. “My dad’s got the money, I’ll just pay for psychological damage or something! If that’s not enough, I’ll ask my dad to make a donation to the school!”

“Human integrity cannot be equated to money. If your father thinks money can solve everything, then I think he’s the one who needs discipline more than you.” Mrs. Mei looked up at this moment to see Shen Liufei standing by the door, and quickly ended the conversation. “You do deserve praise for your courage to stand up to your mistake, but I don’t need your money. Your punishment will be to be in charge of classroom chores for a whole month. You can only learn respect after you’ve paid the price in time and labor.”

The student walked away, displeased, as he mumbled beneath his breath, “My uncle’s the director of education around here, just you wait...”

Of course Mrs. Mei heard the words but remained unfazed by them. She lifted her head and gave Shen Liufei a smile. “Come in.”

Words from a teacher like her certainly had weight; Shen Liufei seemed to understand why the police officer in charge six years ago chose to believe Yao Yao simply ran away from home.

“I work at the Hanhai City bureau and would like to ask about a certain student,” Shen Liufei introduced himself briefly, then asked about Yao Yao’s situation.

The teacher still remembered the quiet student and insisted on her original theory. She said that Yao Yao was an internet addict who ditched class to fulfill her fantasies of a teenage romance. She also claimed the girl would fake parent signatures on agendas and lie through her teeth as soon as she was caught; Mrs. Mei seemed convinced that the girl was an actual worm who crawled anywhere as she pleased.

Additionally, she claimed Peng Yixuan had no reason to bully Yao Yao.

Shen Liufei asked, “Did Yao Yao mention that she was being bullied by Peng Yixuan and her little group of friends before she went missing?”

“She did mention it once,” Mei Shumin didn’t seem to like this question and responded in slight annoyance. “But that girl was always lying.”

“I’m only asking you this because I noticed that Yao Yao’s teachers were mostly male, and you were the only female teacher she had. Yao Yao may not have had the best grades, but her Chinese class grades—especially writing—were above average. I suspect that you were her favorite teacher. If she couldn’t tell her father what happened in school, I believe the only person she could open up and speak to was you,” Shen Liufei remarked. “So why are you so sure that this little girl who came to you for help at a desperate time was lying?”

“Peng Yixuan is an exceptional student in all areas; she had no reason to bully Yao Yao. On the other hand, Yao Yao constantly lied so that she could skip class.” Mei Shumin refused to yield and questioned the man before her coldly, “You’re trying to say that I took a bribe from the Peng family, is that it?”

“No, it’s precisely that you weren’t bribed that this is a problem. You’re a good teacher.” Shen Liufei frowned slightly. “Hai Rui was a great official in the Ming dynasty, but even a man of integrity like him could fall victim when his reputation is at stake; when given the option, he might have given other officials like him the benefit of the doubt over trusting the words of the commoner. In a way, that’s stereotype bias.”

Mei Shumin’s expression darkened. “You’re very well-read.”

“Thank you. That concludes my questions.” Shen Liufei stopped just before he left the door and turned to ask, “Have you ever considered, even for a split second, that your judgment was wrong?”

Mei Shumin solemnly gazed up at the young man. Moments later, she said confidently, “I’m right. I cannot be wrong.”

Leaving the St. Noe Middle School campus, Shen Liufei looked up at the sky; night was falling. Dusk’s warm light seeped into the clouds, leaving a soft, reddish glow. The coral gradient dyed the clear sky a uniquely beautiful color.

The first day was about to end.

He put on his helmet, got on his bike, and accelerated through the streets, which glowed red under the sunset. Turning the handles of his bike, he sped up faster and faster on the highway.

The screech of brakes pierced the silent evening. After he got off the bike, Shen Liufei somehow found himself at Xie Lanshan’s residence.

Despite knowing the man wasn’t around, he looked up toward the window and had to slowly catch his breath as he panted harshly. His unsightliness couldn’t bother him because his heart was about to shatter.

He ran into the young girl who loved cats. She’d brought food with her, knowing Xie Lanshan often didn’t come home for days when he was busy with work. She helped care for the cats when the man wasn’t around.

The girl pulled out a key beneath the doormat and unlocked the door. Shen Liufei also knew Xie Lanshan had a habit of keeping his house keys under his doormat, as the officer was confident no burglars would come steal anything since he had no valuables. Besides, most people around the area knew he was a cop and wouldn't dare.

Five kittens rushed over like bullets to nudge the visitors, begging to be fed.

The little girl squatted to put cat food inside the small bowls and asked the man watching her, "So you're Shen Liufei?"

Last time they'd met, they never had time to properly greet each other. "How did you know my name?"

Smiling, she pointed at the two white cats. "Big Bro Xie said these two are his favorite furballs but also the ones he wants to punch the most."

The kittens grew up fast and were almost twice the size of three weeks ago. Each grew up fine and round, cute in their own unique ways. The two white cats were more elegant and aloof than the others and had snow-like fur. Shen Liufei recalled the little spotted kitten they didn't have time to name the last time. "Does this black-and-white one have a name now?"

"Oh, this kitten?" The girl grinned. "His name is Ai. I told Big Bro Xie that he's a boy and that Ai's a girl's name, but he didn't listen to me."

His name is Ai.

Ai, as in "love."

Shen Liufei's gaze shifted over to the kitten named Lan, who behaved a little like Xie Lanshan. Before eating, this kitten would shove the others aside with an air of naughty energy, but when it noticed a human's gaze, the kitten would give an innocent purr to get affection—a sneaky little one indeed.

Shen Liufei sat on the sofa. As he watched the kittens eat, his gaze softened and warmed. All the times he had spent with Xie Lanshan since they met replayed in his mind, every memory clear as if the events had only happened yesterday. A corner of his lips lifted.

After feeding the cats, the little girl prepared to leave, then turned to ask Shen Liufei just before she walked out, "Are you not leaving too?"

He shook his head, then slowly leaned back under the dimming sunlight, closing his eyes. "I'm going to sit a little longer."

(iii)

Chang Ming died too abruptly.

The girls guessed, "Do you think Xie Lanshan did this? He's the only outsider and the only one who could possibly kill Uncle Chang with a knife like that."

“If he did it, then you all should thank me right now. I’ve locked the dangerous culprit away.” Peng Yixuan pulled the keys to the handcuffs from her pocket and tossed them into the ocean. “We’ll turn him in to the cops once we head back to shore.”

Yu Yangzi rubbed her chin. “But how do we sail back?”

Rather than pondering who killed Chang Ming, the more pressing question weighed down on everyone’s shoulders—no one here knew how to sail. The satellite network was also malfunctioning, so they needed to find a way to save themselves at sea without any outside help.

“If my dad can’t get in contact with me, he will definitely call the cops. Once the cops send in their helicopter to rescue us, we’ll be saved; we only need to wait patiently for them to come.” In contrast to everyone else’s panic, Peng Yixuan was calm. She even seemed pleased. “We have everything on the ship anyway. It’s better than staying at home. Why are you guys complaining?”

Time was a strange thing. For a pacified heart, a day could go by as fast as the blink of an eye, but for a heavy one, days could feel like years and every minute like purgatory. Seven women were on board, six girls and one teacher, all well-acquainted with each other. Gathering up felt safer, so aside from restroom breaks, everyone stayed in the main cabin.

Staying together didn’t mean people got along well. As time passed, unease engulfed them. Some worried about their Monday classes; others pondered about Chang Ming’s death... each girl had her own apprehension and none could find a way to distract themselves.

For dinner, Xiao Gu cooked a few plates of tomato sauce and spaghetti from the limited food supplies. Since Lu Weiwei was diabetic, she returned to her room to self-inject insulin right before they ate.

After a few bites, the girls dropped their forks. The group exchanged glances; the looming air inside the cabin dropped a few degrees.

Bored, Peng Yixuan suggested with a smile, “Let’s play a game. How about Mafia?”

She ordered Zuo Ruoqi to pick out the board game, but everyone else seemed disinterested; after all, a person had just died on the ship.

“Why are you guys so gloomy? I’ve said everything will be fine.” Peng Yixuan finally lost her temper. She stood up from her seat, ready to return to her room.

Qiu Fei called out to her, “Yixuan, let’s stay together—”

Just then, the lights inside the cabin went out. The girls all panicked and screeched in horror.

“Calm down, girls, stay where you’re at! Let me take a look. Maybe the power tripped!” Xiao Gu turned on the flashlight on her phone and walked out

of the dining room.

The moment Xiao Gu stepped out of the door, accompanied by the screams of the girls, a soft and childish voice sang, “Who hides their crimes under the sun, who hides their hands covered in blood—watch out for the knife pressed to your chest, little clueless bird, you’ll walk to your death...”

The singing voice was sweet and clear but obviously coming from some sort of altered recording.

The song stopped abruptly, then the off-tune, childish voice continued, “Girls, let’s play a game. Each person must tell me a dark secret one of your friends here has kept from everyone else—remember, the more dangerous and twisted this secret, the safer you will be. Also, you can’t repeat what other people have already said, or the next person to die after Chang Ming will be you.”

Darkness perpetuated fear, spreading like the plague and engulfing the small cabin space. After a brief, deathly silence, Zuo Ruoqi was the first to cry out, “The anonymous person who reported Yu Xin and her affair with her math teacher was Yu Yangzi!”

Yu Xin lost her guaranteed slot in college because of this report; the math teacher she had a crush on was also fired and had disappeared. In addition to bombing her high school exam and being held back, Yu Xin constantly suffered the mocking gazes of her peers in school. Her seemingly bright future had disappeared as well.

The current circumstances didn’t matter; Yu Xin could never let go of this grudge.

“So it was you! I’m your sis—how could you stab me in the back?” Ignoring the dangerous situation, she lunged toward where Yu Yangzi had been before the lights had turned off and began strangling her cousin.

Trapped, Yu Yangzi believed that she would die like the recording foretold if she didn’t comply. She choked out, “Qiu Fei is selling this ‘beauty cure’ at school, but they’re actually drugs!”

Qiu Fei’s whole body tensed as if death had called her name. “Peng Yixuan killed a girl named Yao Yao—she was our middle-school classmate!”

The situation had devolved into a vicious dog-eat-dog fight where none of the girls hesitated to rip through each other’s fanciful façade and expose their bloody and horrific secrets. But Peng Yixuan wasn’t like the panicking girls spewing out nonsense; instead, she thought this was quite interesting. Even when her name was brought up, she simply responded, “I was only hurting her. At the time, Yao Yao wasn’t dead. Lu Weiwei suggested silencing her and removing all the evidence.”

The lights came back on. Perhaps Xiao Gu had reset the switch outside and brought the electricity back.

Amidst the chaos, the quiet Lu Weiwei suddenly fell to the ground. Her face was deathly pale; sweat covered her body as she panted. Her limbs spasmed as if she'd been electrocuted.

After the blackout, even Xie Lanshan noticed something was off, though he was still trapped in the storage room. He heard screams—the girls' screeches were loud enough to pierce through the ship.

Xie Lanshan had been locked up for the whole day, so his throat was dry like a desert and his stomach empty with hunger. No one had bothered to deliver water or food; the teenagers had forgotten they'd locked him up in this cramped space. Now, more concerned about what had happened, he tossed his own frustration aside. Even if the girls were loud and mean, they were teenagers; he couldn't and wouldn't take their antics too personally.

He looked for some wire to unlock his handcuffs but instead found a strange package hidden in the depths of the storage room.

The contents were shaped like large salt crystals and glowed maroon.

As an experienced former undercover cop, Xie Lanshan was more than familiar with the substance. Cold sweat rolled down his face; goosebumps crawled along his skin.

This was pure meth extract: red ice.

No wonder he'd caught Chang Ming hovering about suspiciously and anxiously. Was he hiding this on the ship? Perhaps Chang Ming used his job as a ship captain to engage in the drug trade. Ferries were the perfect hiding spot; no one would guess this luxurious ship carried such a dangerous substance.

"Is anyone there? Someone, open the door! Let me out!"

As the situation grew visibly more dangerous, Xie Lanshan banged on the door. His hands were still cuffed, but he needed to find a way to get out of this room. He slammed on and called at the door for a good seven or eight minutes until someone finally came.

Zuo Ruoqi had followed Peng Yixuan's orders to lock the man inside the storage room, but she already felt guilty. Now that someone had really died on the ship, anxiety quickly consumed her.

She searched her way down to the storage room and asked in a sheepish voice, "Are you really a cop?"

"Yes, I'm a real cop." Her hesitant attitude told Xie Lanshan there really was a situation. He asked through the small window of the room, "Did something happen?"

Still scared, Zuo Ruoqi kept her distance from the door. "Uncle Chang—the one sailing the ship—died."

Xie Lanshan was taken aback. “Chang Ming died? How?” After discovering the red ice, he worried the drug dealer might harm the teenage girls, but he hadn’t expected the most dangerous man aboard to drop dead first.

Zuo Ruoqi’s voice trembled, as if she were ready to cry. “He was stabbed right in the chest and died on the steering wheel. All the girls were scared out of their minds.”

“Just a single stab wound?” Xie Lanshan was surprised.

Zuo Ruoqi nodded. “There was only one.”

Xie Lanshan was baffled. Chang Ming used to be a soldier; he could easily fight back, even if all of the women on the ship attacked him at once. How could anyone kill him so easily? Besides, Xie Lanshan hadn’t caught any abnormal sounds hanging around the control cabin the night before. Not even Xie Lanshan could ambush Chang Ming without making noise.

After giving it some thought, Xie Lanshan asked, “So, there’s no more captain. Were you able to contact people on land?”

She shook her head. “We tried, but it didn’t work. We don’t know why. It seems like all communication equipment on board has broken down.”

He followed up, “What about the other girls. Is everyone all right?”

Zuo Ruoqi nodded her head and admitted, “We’re fine, but...”

Xie Lanshan was growing anxious. “But what?”

“When the blackout happened, we heard this voice coming from some sort of recording device. The voice told us we needed to expose a dark secret, or else one of us would die. Lu Weiwei didn’t say anything, and then she dropped to the ground...” Zuo Ruoqi shivered. The sudden death of an adult man and the darkness clearly clouded her judgment and made her believe this charade. “Weiwei took some insulin before dinner, so Yu Xin said she must have injected too much and fainted. This happened once at school too. The rest of the group carried her back to her bed now so she could rest, and they’re preparing some sugar water to feed her...”

Xie Lanshan frowned, pondering the situation. The girls had reacted properly to the unusual circumstances; however, given Chang Ming’s mysterious murder and the creepy voice, it was suspicious. Was this a road leading into a mastermind’s trap?

He asked Zuo Ruoqi sternly, “Did you come in contact with Lu Weiwei after she fell to the ground? Was her breathing heavy and fast? Was there a rotten-apple smell coming out of her mouth?”

Zuo Ruoqi traced back her memories. “Yes! That scent was pretty heavy—you could smell it when you got close to her!”

Just as he expected. “Quick, stop your friends right now—don’t let them feed Lu Weiwei sugar water!”

“Why not?”

“Heavy and fast breathing and that rotten-apple smell are symptoms of hyperglycemia, not low blood sugar. I suspect that someone swapped Lu Weiwei’s insulin with something else. If you feed her more sugar right now, Lu Weiwei will certainly die!” Xie Lanshan’s expression was grim, and his eyebrows pressed tight. A life was in danger right now. Every second counted. He swiftly gave Zuo Ruoqi instructions, “Check for tea leaves on the ship. Make a cup of tea with table salt and feed it to Lu Weiwei. Make sure she is lying on her side. Ketoacidosis will trigger a vomit reaction, and lying flat on her back could clog her windpipe. Stay beside Lu Weiwei tonight and watch out for the stuff she pukes out. Be ready to perform CPR on her at any time.”

“Okay, okay, I got it.” Though dumbfounded, Zuo Ruoqi quickly picked herself back up and memorized every word Xie Lanshan had said. She turned to run back up the stairs, only to be called back. She glanced at him in confusion.

Xie Lanshan smiled. “You’re a brave girl. The culprit must be among you guys, so keep yourself safe too.”

“Sorry... I shouldn’t have helped Peng Yixuan with her prank to mess with you...” The unwelcomed guest never once had mentioned his current situation, nor asked her to free him from the storage room. Instead, he’d focused on the wellbeing of others. Tears welled in Zuo Ruoqi’s eyes, and she gave Xie Lanshan a smile. “I believe you’re a cop now!”

(iv)

Even though the municipal bureau had asked for Yao Shuxin’s letter to be kept from mass media to avoid unnecessary panic, independent journalists still dug up the scoop. They quickly exposed the contents on the internet. The next morning, the parents of the missing girls gathered their family members and friends to surround the violent crimes unit’s office at the municipal bureau. They demanded the police give a concrete plan of rescue and inform the families immediately of any updates.

“It’s been an entire day since the letter was sent out. Maybe something already happened to our little Yangzi!” Yu Yangzi’s mother was a strong and independent single mother who never relied on anyone while raising her child. Her harsh life had left her with a worn face and trained her to have a loud voice, yet her usual aggressiveness vanished before she could say another word.

“My Weiwei has very severe diabetes; I don’t even know if she brought enough insulin with her. You cops are all sitting here not doing anything—can’t you take some action?!” Lu Weiwei’s father was a cab driver for high-

ranking officials, and used to greeting his passengers amicably and wearing a courteous smile, yet at this very moment, the rather small and thin man raised a fist toward a cop a whole head taller than him without hesitation.

Xiao Liang and Ding Li patiently answered the parents but weren't able to ease their concerns. After one parent raised a fist, the rest of the scene dissolved into chaos. Xiao Liang caught a fist right below his chin but didn't throw back a punch; Ding Li's ponytail was almost undone.

When the clock struck nine, the sunlight dispersed the morning fog, blinding everyone. Passing by the violent crimes and homicide unit's office, Tao Jun stopped and stared quietly at the chaotic reception, then let out a small sigh. The worried parents couldn't be shooed away, nor easily calmed.

In the end, Tao Longyue had no choice but to forcefully pull Xiao Liang's and Lu Weiwei's fathers apart. To console the panicking parents, he raised his voice. "I'm the captain of the violent crimes and homicide unit of the bureau, Tao Longyue. Please calm down and listen to me right now; we have a cop currently on the ship."

"Really?" The scene settled down. Yu Yangzi's mother relaxed but still wasn't convinced. "Is that... is that cop reliable?"

"Yes!" Captain Tao stated with confidence. "He's the best officer we have in the entire Hanhai City municipal bureau with an incredible track record for solving difficult cases. He's a dependable investigator who has earned recognition from the government—there's no need to worry!"

Despite saying these words, Tao Longyue himself was still worried. No one knew what had happened on the ship during the long, sleepless night. Perhaps one young and innocent life had already left them as the sun rose.

Lu Weiwei's father pulled back his fist, his old and wrinkled eyes welling with tears. "But my daughter... my daughter's health..."

Captain Tao consoled him patiently, "I believe my colleague will take good care of your daughter, and I hope everyone puts some faith in our team. You can all either return home and wait for our updates—or wait here and hinder our investigation."

Almost as soon as Tao Longyue finished, Chi Jin stepped into the bureau. He believed they should send in a helicopter to conduct a rescue mission at sea, then seize the ship with their remaining forces.

Though enraged, Captain Tao wasn't upset at the panicking parents nor the overbearing Chi Jin; he was mostly frustrated at his powerlessness. "Xie Lanshan is on the ship—"

Chi Jin sneered. "I'm worried precisely because Xie Lanshan is there. Rather than letting him run free and cause more trouble, we should take the initiative and strike first."

Tao Longyue wasn't pleased with this snarky comment about his brother. "Captain Chi, I know you're more experienced and skilled than I am, since you have already reached the rank of a third-class supervisor, but I must remind you that we are in Hanhai, in the office of the violent crimes and homicide unit; unless it's an order directly from the higher-ups, you do not have the authority to interfere with my work."

Chi Jin said coldly, "This *is* an order from the higher-ups."

Tao Longyue wasn't convinced. "What?"

At this point, Tao Jun walked into the office.

"It's true," Tao Jun said gravely and delivered an order directly from their superiors. Vice Chief Liu had already agreed to let Chi Jin handle the case and requested all units to cooperate with him.

Chi Jin's handsome face was blank and unfathomable. He handed a landline phone to Tao Longyue, then said in a forceful tone, "Captain Tao, please contact the coast guard headquarters and arrange for rescue as soon as possible."

Frowning, Tao Longyue didn't take the phone, pressing the scar on his head as he attempted to stall. Yet, as time passed, cold sweat gathered on his back. His confidence diminished.

"The longer you drag it out, the more excruciating the pain is—are you going to wait until all the girls on the ship are killed before you send the rescue team?" Chi Jin derided the man, then pulled the phone back and prepared to call the coast guard himself.

Just then, someone grabbed his wrist from behind. The hand was cold and wet, but the grip was forceful and tight.

Chi Jin attempted to break free but failed; the phone in his hand dropped to the ground.

This was the first time Chi Jin had failed to fight back against anyone, and his blood boiled. He turned around in anger to meet a chilling aura and sharp, dangerous gaze. He recognized those eyes—they were of the specialist the municipal bureau had hired. In a slightly more courteous tone, he greeted the man, "Mr. Shen, how may I help you?"

"You likely can't." Shen Liufei let go of the man and responded cordially, "I simply have a question for you, Captain Chi."

"Go on."

"Yao Shuxin said in the letter he will kill one girl on the ship a day. So, is it possible the man is on land and that one of the eight people on board is his spy?"

Shen Liufei's analysis wasn't unreasonable, so Chi Jin nodded. "Let's assume Yao Shuxin wasn't bluffing. Then it leaves us with two possible scenarios: One, Yao Shuxin himself is on the ship, but I doubt that's the case.

So, I'm leaning toward the second scenario, as Mr. Shen said—someone on the ship is working with him, and they will be in contact with each other through satellite connection. This is why I believe we should act first and seize the ship; the enemy is in hiding, and we can't defend ourselves against someone we aren't familiar with. The other reason is because he will not actually blow up the entire ship if his comrade is on board."

"That's hard to say," Shen Liufei said. "I'm sure you've seen how these parents acted out of the ordinary today for the sake of their children. The careless became more sensitive, while the weak grew claws. I've just paid Yao Shuxin's old neighbor a visit. He divorced his wife due to a clash in personality, but both parents loved their daughter equally. Since Yao Yao's disappearance has been public for years, how come we haven't seen a trace of her mother even today?"

Chi Jin frowned. Indeed, in a case like this, a parent would naturally give up everything to search for their sole, beloved missing daughter.

"This is only my own guess." Shen Liufei pressed his eyebrows together. "But one scenario is certain to occur. A ship of that size is normally equipped with tons of fuel. If any explosions happened, people stuck on the ship would not be able to escape. Forcefully seizing the ship will likely end up costing us eight innocent lives."

Chi Jin said, "So what you're saying is...?"

"I suggest everyone return to their posts and leave the ship to Xie Lanshan. What we need to do now is search for the truth behind Yao Yao's disappearance."

"You really believe Xie Lanshan can handle it?"

"I believe in him." Shen Liufei looked firmly into Chi Jin's eyes. "That's the kind of person Xie Lanshan is; even at the cost of his own life, he will ensure the safety of all the girls."

(v)

Even though it risked her own safety, Zuo Ruoqi didn't stay with the other girls. Instead, she stayed wide awake the whole night beside Lu Weiwei. Just as the young officer said, Lu Weiwei threw up a few times. Thanks to Zuo Ruoqi's diligence in cleaning the vomit, the young girl didn't choke on her own spit.

Even though a night had passed, the sky was still clouded. Zuo Ruoqi rested her head by the bedside, trying to keep her eyes open. Her whole body was sore from staying up all night; she wanted to sleep. Suddenly, she heard a knock. Zuo Ruoqi didn't dare let her guard down and stood up carefully, then pressed her face to the door. "Who is it?"

“It’s me, Xiao Gu.”

She opened the door; Xiao Gu and Yu Yangzi stood outside.

The guest rooms slept two people in one room. Yu Yangzi originally had shared a room with Yu Xin, but after the chaotic incident the night before, she no longer dared to do that and asked to stay with Xiao Gu.

Xiao Gu called Zuo Ruoqi to eat, but the latter refused. Her half-open eyes were dazed, but she forced herself to stay awake. “I promised I’d stay by Weiwei’s side the whole night.”

“Who did you promise? Besides, it’s already morning now.” Xiao Gu patted Zuo Ruoqi’s shoulders. “Go get something to eat with your classmates. I’ll watch over her for you.”

At her limit, Zuo Ruoqi finally stood up. Once she reached the door, she remembered something. The young girl looked at Xiao Gu with a pair of bright and hopeful eyes. “Miss Xiao, Weiwei would have been dead by now if it wasn’t for Officer Xie.” She begged sincerely, “Please let him out. He really, truly is a police officer!”

Xiao Gu nodded blankly and only gave the girl a slight smile, as if she were thinking about something else.

Zuo Ruoqi had sat still for a whole night, so her legs had fallen asleep. At first, she couldn’t catch her balance and had to lean on Yu Yangzi. “How did you all sleep last night? Did anything else happen?”

“No, we were all burned out from the day before and knocked out as soon as we got in bed.” Perhaps because of her young age and naiveté, Yu Yangzi was visibly less worried about their current situation. During the blackout, she had definitely been as scared as if the world was ending, but once she got over her fear, she’d fallen asleep soundly. She walked slowly with her friend. Then, as if she remembered something, her expression darkened. “There is something weird, though. You know how I slept in the same room as Miss Xiao Gu last night, right? I noticed a pill or something dropped below her bed...”

“It’s probably a painkiller or medicine,” Zuo Ruoqi responded nonchalantly. “What’s weird about that?”

“It’s not exactly a pill—only half of one. It’s blue, like the antibiotics we take when we’re sick. I think she cracked open the pill because some of the powder inside spilled out.” Yu Yangzi didn’t tell Zuo Ruoqi that she had taken the half pill and hidden it. Instead, she shook her head. “I don’t know either. Maybe I’m just being paranoid because of Uncle Chang’s death and Weiwei’s situation—I’m really scared.”

Low blood sugar could easily be treated with sugar intake, but discomfort from high blood sugar was much more difficult to handle. After taking in large

amounts of salted tea water, Lu Weiwei's acid poisoning symptoms had eased. However, the young girl's head was still cloudy; she lay helplessly on the bed, still lethargic with her life on the line.

Almost as soon as Zuo Ruoqi and Yu Yangzi left the room, Lu Weiwei vomited again. Xiao Gu helped the girl sit up and caught the vomit with a paper towel in hand.

A disgusting smell wafted from the corner of her lips. Opening her eyes, Lu Weiwei saw Xiao Gu's face through her blurred vision. She realized she had lived, and tears rolled down her face. Grabbing tightly onto Xiao Gu's hand, she repeated she was very regretful.

In the face of death, the girl desperately tried to repent for her sins rather than cling onto the last thread of life. She bared her entire self without caring to whom she was confessing.

"I regret it very much." Lu Weiwei lay back down, speaking through her tears. "I shouldn't have been so selfish... I had a dance competition the next day, a competition I prepped a whole year for... Yu Xin had good grades and dancing was just a hobby; Peng Yixuan was rich, and dancing was just another one of her pastimes. But I'm different. I was really scared I would be disqualified..."

As if captivated by that horrific scene, Lu Weiwei began coughing violently.

Xiao Gu stood against the light, her eyes dim. She watched the girl without offering a helping hand, coldly waiting for the coughing to finish.

"I don't know why, but Peng Yixuan hated Yao Yao. She knew Yao Yao's father worked for Starex Group and would often bully her. She would take Yao Yao's shirt off, slap her in the face, and even threaten her to not tell anyone. That day, Peng Yixuan poured oil on Yao Yao and made Qiu Fei light a small fire to scare her. I originally tried to stop them, but the fire got really out of hand. Yao Yao burned up almost instantly... she was crying, screaming. The rest of us were dumbfounded..."

"You are all too cruel!" Even from the young girl's broken words, Xiao Gu could picture the horrific scene. Her whole body shook; her heart was cut open. "What happened next?"

"Yao Yao jumped into the pool. By the time we pulled her out, she wasn't breathing. Peng Yixuan asked us what we were going to do about it, and at the time, the first thought that came to me was my dance competition. So, then I said, 'Well, she's already dead anyway, and nobody would see us at a time like this. Why don't we just secretly bury her?'"

Xiao Gu felt her heart in pain once more, to the point where her voice trembled, as if a once-healed wound had been cut open again. "Where did you bury the girl's body?"

“I was the first to leave to prepare for the dance competition the next day. Yu Xin, Qiu Fei, and Peng Yixuan were all still around by the time I left, so I have no idea where they buried Yao Yao...”

Still shaking, Xiao Gu painfully closed her eyes, tears of anger welling like boiling lava burning through her flesh.

“But... I didn’t know I would be diagnosed with diabetes right after the competition. Maybe it’s karma. After that, we all agreed nobody would bring up the incident again. I was busy treating my diabetes and distanced myself from them...”

After this brief return to her senses, Lu Weiwei once again fell into a deep sleep. Her mind was filled with the scene of Peng Yixuan’s accusation earlier; the karmic cycle was inescapable, and she knew that the evil masquerading as the benevolent one was herself. She was the evil that pushed the person down a boat to save herself—a disgusting and despicable human.

Around noontime, Xiao Gu remembered Xie Lanshan was still locked in the storage room. She prepared lunch and carried it down to the bottom of the ship.

There wasn’t a lot of food left, so lunch was pasta with sausages and black olives. In another two days, their stores would run out completely.

It was only early afternoon, but the sky was a gloomy gray; the little rays of sunlight passing through the rain clouds were like rusted metal. The air was heavy inside. The seagulls glided on the surface of the ocean, visible from the small window of the storage room, their cries sharp and ominous, as if the whole world was ready to be engulfed in darkness and chaos.

Xiao Gu knocked on the little window. “Officer Xie, here’s some food for you.”

The door was locked from the outside; the keys were in Peng Yixuan’s hands, so the circular window had to be broken.

Despite being left to starve for a whole day and a half, Xie Lanshan strangely didn’t feel hungry. There was a murderer on this ship, so his mind was constantly occupied and worried about the safety of the girls on board. Xie Lanshan smiled at Xiao Gu through the window. “So, Miss Xiao, you believe I’m a cop now?”

Xiao Gu nodded. “Zuo Ruoqi trusts you. She said without your help, Lu Weiwei would have been dead already.”

“Thank you for your trust.” Xie Lanshan sighed in relief. However, he was still trapped, and the most important task right now was finding a way out. He raised his handcuffed hands and waved them at Xiao Gu. “Do you happen to have the keys?”

Xiao Gu had been the last to hold the keys, but the older woman shook her head. “I don’t. The truth is Yixuan threw the key into the ocean. I couldn’t stop her—she’s too self-centered.”

Xie Lanshan’s last ray of hope dimmed. “Can I ask you to check Chang Ming’s toolbox for thin wires of some sort?”

Xie Lanshan planned to break the handcuffs by force. Yet, after searching around outside, Xiao Gu said there wasn’t anything of the sort on the ship.

Another singing voice soon interrupted this brief exchange. This time, Xie Lanshan could hear it clearly: a simple yet still extremely eerie melody sung by a child’s beautiful voice. Beneath the clear voice was a hint of rage, like a fire fueled on hatred and vengeance.

“Who hides their crimes under the sun, who hides their hands covered in blood—watch out for the knife pressed to your chest, little clueless bird, you’ll walk to your death...”

“Go check on those girls!” Xie Lanshan called out. His instincts told him that something new was about to happen and he could only rely on the other adult to take care of them.

“O-okay!” Xiao Gu was taken aback briefly before rushing off to the living room where the girls had gathered.

(vi)

They had been stuck on the ship for three days. Aside from Lu Weiwei, who was still unconscious in her room, a deathly silence fell on the girls gathered in the main cabin.

What should they say? What could they say? They were best friends on the outside but demons on the inside. As in a novel’s stereotypical isolated-villa-in-a-snowstorm scenario, the most fatal danger always lay within the human heart. No one could trust anyone else at this point.

To the shock of everyone on board, the singing stopped abruptly. The girls had carefully traced the sounds last time and discovered the recorder, but they hadn’t expected there to be more than one.

“Girls, the game is about to start again,” the malicious but cute voice of a little girl once again rang out.

Everyone on the ship started, then began to tremble. After Chang Ming’s death and Lu Weiwei’s illness, every girl worried she would be next.

“During the last game, you all admitted you killed your classmate Yao Yao and wiped her out of the world like nothing more than a piece of dust. So now every single one of you will be punished for Yao Yao’s death. Your captain and classmate Lu Weiwei are both dead. Who will be next?”

Everyone held their breath and froze. At that moment, a large wave crashed into the ship, shaking the entire vessel.

"Let's play a game to decide. I'll do a countdown. By the time it ends, you will all call out the name of someone. The person who gets the most votes in the end will become the next sacrifice of this game. Of course, you all can choose to stay silent like you did last time; then everyone will be safe. But remember, girls, this may be the only time you can get your revenge on someone who has harmed you. Also, even if you choose to give up this chance, it doesn't mean others will let you off the hook."

As the brightest girl, Yu Xin quickly realized the game was another form of the prisoner's dilemma. In the famous scenario, two accomplices of a criminal gang are imprisoned, separated, and faced with three different possibilities: One, both choose to not betray each other and are each sentenced to one year in prison. Two, one person could betray the other and one could remain silent, leading to the person who confessed being freed and ten years of imprisonment for the silent one. Three, the two criminals could expose each other, and then both parties would be sentenced to eight years in prison. During times of crisis, people's trust in one another often diminished. The criminals would most often choose to betray one another instead of choosing to remain silent.

"All right, girls, I'm going to start counting down. Ten—"

The recorded girl's voice began counting clearly and lyrically, yet everyone knew that this sweet voice was a countdown to death. Yu Xin had been betrayed by her own blood once; she instinctively thought the younger girl would do the same this time and call her name. She quickly turned to shoot a glance at Yu Yangzi, only to see the latter was also giving her a complicated look.

As the two exchanged glances across the room, sparks of the conflict erupted. Yu Xin realized her cousin really was planning on calling her name.

"Nine—" The countdown was quite slow, as if the recorder purposely left time for the girls to argue among themselves to heighten the conflict.

Yu Xin felt endangered. "The person who killed Uncle Chang and almost killed Weiwei must be someone among us. Don't buy into this provocation. Everyone, keep quiet and see when that person will reveal themselves!" Yet as soon as she finished, Zuo Ruoqi and Yu Yangzi leaned close to each other, quickly exchanging words in a whisper only the two could hear. Then they both gave Yu Xin a strange look.

"Eight—"

Angered and anxious, Yu Xin quickly spewed out words without thinking. "Why are you all looking at me like that? Do you want to say my name? Zuo Ruoqi, what were you chatting with my sis about just now? Do you even know

what our best option is? I'm sure you don't because you're always the most unstable variable in our group, you stupid, wannabe, foolish tool!"

"Seven—"

At this line, Qiu Fei sneered. "I think you're the joker here; do you really like giving offensive nicknames to people that much?" Qiu Fei always remembered Yu Xin was the first person to call her fugly. This extremely mocking nickname had followed her throughout her teenage years. Recalling all those memories now, pain struck her heart as if a sharp knife sliced through her flesh.

Yu Yangzi quickly grabbed Zuo Ruoqi, ensuring their alliance with the tight embrace. In the meantime, Zuo Ruoqi quickly exchanged glances with Qiu Fei. These girls possessed the ability to quickly determine who their enemies and allies were and stick together in times of need.

Right now, it was three votes against one.

"Six—"

On the other hand, Yu Xin was still attempting to explain the prisoner's dilemma and why keeping quiet was in the best interest of everyone, yet she also knew remaining calm and making the most reasonable choice under this kind of circumstance was difficult. On top of that, the group's bond had already shattered.

"Five—four—three—"

The countdown suddenly sped up like the siren of death. Yu Xin's last bit of sense snapped; she pulled the recorder off the table and tossed it outside the window.

"Why is it me? Why did you guys choose me?" She charged forward and grabbed Zuo Ruoqi's shirt. "Who gave you the right to choose me? If you didn't suggest for us to go on a cruise, we wouldn't have been stuck here out at sea!"

Feeling wronged, Zuo Ruoqi struggled out of the older girl's grip. "I only mentioned it off-handedly; you guys agreed and planned it. Besides, whatever happened four years ago was among you all. Neither Yangzi nor I were involved; we're the innocent ones dragged into this!"

Nodding, Yu Yangzi pushed her cousin. "That's right! You did this to yourself and dragged me into it!"

The physical confrontation triggered another round of conflict. Yu Xin turned toward Yu Yangzi and shoved her. Looking disappointed, she raised her voice. "I haven't even gotten my chance to scold you yet. I sacrificed all my time during summer and winter break to tutor you—I let you copy my essays and even gave you all the questions your teachers would put on your tests. How could you do this to me?"

“Hmph!” Yu Yangzi interrupted the other girl by pushing her cousin back. This time, she put in a little force, sending Yu Xin tumbling to the floor.

“I hate your pretentious, aloof attitude!” Yu Yangzi looked at her from above, venting years’ worth of her frustration all at once. “And your parents too. My parents couldn’t even dare to hold their heads high every year during family gatherings on holidays because of them! I remember one time, when we were gathered for New Year’s Eve dinner, your dad pointed at my dad and said, ‘Considering her bad grades, Yangzi must have inherited your stupidity. She’s hopeless.’ Everyone laughed at my dad, and even my mom was ready to cry. Sure, you have good grades, you’re pretty, and you know how to dance. You can do anything you want. So why did you have to seduce your math teacher to get the test answers early? Also, what was that whole ‘ship of Theseus’ thing and ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ thing—aren’t you tired? Would it kill you to stop showing off for even one minute?”

Thrown into the deserted land, betrayed by her friends and family, wronged and depressed, Yu Xin remembered Yao Yao that night when the group surrounded her. Yao Yao’s desperate cries of pain now resonated with her. In a daze, she raised her head and turned to her last friend for consolation. However, Peng Yixuan’s expression remained stony, disgusted, and uncaring—as if this wasn’t her business.

Yu Xin broke down. Suddenly, she pulled a knife from behind her back and rushed toward the rest of the girls, ready to take everyone down with her. The night Lie Weiwei had collapsed, someone had shoved the knife under Yu Xin’s door, and she’d kept it with her ever since.

Screaming, the girls ran.

Swinging the knife, Yu Xin chased the girls down and called out to Peng Yixuan, “It’s clear someone’s trying to get their revenge on us for Yao Yao. You kept bullying her—that night right after Lu Weiwei left, Yao Yao woke up! She never died. She could have been saved! You were scared her dad would come to harass your family and affect your parents’ business, so you insisted on silencing her. I even pulled out my phone and got ready to call the cops—”

“But did you actually? You didn’t!” Peng Yixuan suddenly stopped running, turning to sneer at Yu Xin. “Qiu Fei and I watched you, just like this. Nobody stopped you, but you still didn’t make the call!”

Freezing, Yu Xin didn’t respond. Indeed, she had already pressed the first two numbers at the time, but then she’d put her phone down just before entering the last.

“You were also guilty of bullying Yao Yao. I wasn’t even fourteen, but you were—and according to the law, you were old enough to be legally responsible for murder and arson. You’re smart and a know-it-all; how could

you not know?" Seeing Yu Xin in a daze, Peng Yixuan continued, "Besides, you were already in your third year of middle school. You had good grades and were waiting to get into your dream high school. You didn't want to save Yao Yao then, so you don't deserve to act like the good person now. My hands may be drenched in blood, but you're as dirty as I am!"

At this point, Xiao Gu entered the room where the girls gathered. Seeing the knife in Yu Xin's hands, she quickly rushed forward.

Xiao Gu attempted to stop Yu Xin from harming the girls but got cut. Fresh blood splattered, and the girls all screamed in horror.

"Everyone, go back into your rooms, lock your doors, and don't walk out!"

With Xiao Gu standing in front of the blade, the girls ran back into their own rooms, shrieking.

Now that everyone else was gone, Yu Xin finally dropped the knife. She stared at Xiao Gu in tears. "I didn't do it on purpose—I really didn't... Peng Yixuan was the boss of all of us, and I only shoved Yao Yao a few times under her orders. I don't know why we went so overboard that night... when I left Peng Yixuan and Qiu Fei, Yao Yao was still alive. Peng Yixuan said she would call her brother to handle it..."

She had always been the smartest girl in the group, but that had been her downfall. Compared to Lu Weiwei's more vocal opposition to control Peng Yixuan's violent tendencies, Yu Xin was the silent follower who remained aloof and uncaring by distancing herself from everything. It wasn't until this very moment that she remembered the night Yao Yao was surrounded by the girls. She'd seen despair on Yao Yao's face and heard the other girl's screeching cries but only truly empathized with these emotions now.

To be silent was to be complicit, and now no one was willing to stand on her side.

(vii)

After a stressful and chaotic time in the main cabin, Qiu Fei returned to her room. Among the girls, she was the closest to Peng Yixuan following Little Miss Millionaire around everywhere, so she had been given a private room almost as luxurious as the master cabin, complete with a dressing room, inner guest room, bathroom, and a large bed with Venetian silk sheets.

Through the window, the sky was completely black, the horizon dark and rumbling with menacing clouds. The storm waiting to rain down remained unseen, leaving the sky like a heavy lead plate pressing on everyone from above.

Drug addicts were often night owls, and the trauma from the charade earlier still haunted her. Thus, Qiu Fei wasn't sleepy at all, only frustrated. She lay on her bed with her eyes closed, then felt something hard beneath her pillow. She pulled out a meth bottle.

This wasn't Qiu Fei's. To get past the security check before heading on the ship, she hadn't brought any red ice. Her original plan was simple; if needed, she could easily ask Chang Ming, but then the man had died.

Every substance abuser knew the real horror of drugs was the addiction and not its physical effects. Drug addicts were all extremely sensitive to visual stimulation, especially users of crystal meth. Any scene or hints related to drugs would trigger an uncontrollable desire for their substance of choice. With a bottle in hand and a stressful situation outside, Qiu Fei didn't stand a chance.

Qiu Fei's body reacted; her heart raced, she trembled, sweat and snot rolled down her face as she was consumed by thoughts of skating on ice and getting high.

Skating on ice was a Chinese slang phrase among drug users. Qiu Fei didn't touch heroin or marijuana but had ended up skating down the path of crystal meth because of Chang Ming.

She hadn't known him before. They had only met once that night four years ago—that night Yao Yao had been murdered.

"You want to leave too?" After calling her brother Peng Cheng, Peng Yixuan pulled on Qiu Fei, who was trying to back away. She stared sharply at Qiu Fei, her large eyes like a snake glaring at its prey. The evil and malice within the gaze chilled Qiu Fei to the bone.

"I'm not..." Qiu Fei glanced at Yao Yao, who twitched on the ground. The girl was still struggling to survive. Qiu Fei closed her eyes. "I'm just worried about the girls that left. Do you think they'll tell anyone?"

"They want to compete and graduate. Each and every one of them is more selfish and crueler than the last; they won't dare tell a soul." Peng Yixuan was calm and collected. She patted Qiu Fei's face. "Now, you, I want to know how you'll promise me you won't say anything."

Qiu Fei didn't immediately respond. She wasn't acquainted with Yao Yao, nor did she have any grudges against her. Still, she had joined in the bullying, but she didn't expect it to get this out of hand.

Nobody could have.

"Of course you won't tell anyone." Before Qiu Fei could answer, Peng Yixuan smiled. This pretty young girl who was always taking advantage of others had a sweet and bright smile. "You were the one who bullied her and set her on fire. If you get found out, even if you're too young to be jailed,

you'll still have to pay a large sum for the injuries. You hang out with me because I give you allowance money all the time, right? Your dad's disabled. Your mom stepped down from work and is only now returning. They live modestly to save money for you to go to the best school. How could you possibly expect them to pay for your wrongdoings?"

With these words, Qiu Fei's face burned up; the heat seeped into her skin until it roasted her flesh. She grabbed tightly onto her shirt with her chubby fingers and didn't respond.

Peng Cheng arrived very quickly in his black Mercedes-Benz driven by Chang Ming. Qiu Fei and Peng Yixuan got in the car. Meanwhile, the two men shoved the injured Yao Yao into the trunk violently, as if she were cattle.

"You should clean up after yourself. Why am I supposed to help you with the trouble you caused?" Peng Cheng asked his sister once he got in the car.

"I know that celebrity's pregnant. How do you think Dad will feel if I told him you slept with her right before your engagement?"

The young master of Starex Group was engaged to another millionaire; the star couple was the envy of many yearning for a perfect, headline-worthy love story. Peng Cheng rubbed the large diamond ring on his middle finger that shone brightly and sneered at his sister, though his voice was nonchalant. "You really are a little monster."

"You flatter me," Peng Yixuan shot back with a sweet smile.

Trembling in fear, Qiu Fei listened to the siblings talk from the passenger seat the entire trip. The siblings lived in a world above everyone else; they wouldn't even bat an eye at killing another human being. To them, human life was as trivial as a speck of dust. Noticing her unease, Chang Ming handed her a bottle of water. Qiu Fei took it with trembling hands and gave the older man a thankful smile.

Qiu Fei couldn't stand the strange atmosphere inside the car. Before she reached home, she pushed the door open from the inside, then ran out.

Meanwhile, pounding still echoed from the trunk; the poor girl was desperately trying to find a way out. Unfortunately, the night was dark and all involved parties chose to remain silent for their own reasons—the road was deathly empty.

The black Benz drove off, leaving only a trail of smoke. Qiu Fei turned her eyes toward the curb; tears streamed down her face.

Qiu Fei thought the story ended there, so she could move on to a new chapter in life, but six months ago, Chang Ming had found her again. He told her she'd dropped her student ID in his car that night, and it was tainted with the blood of the victim. He'd kept it in secret until he needed a bargaining chip.

The man looked tough, reliable, and humble on the outside, but he was rotten to the core beneath. No one knew where the man sourced his drugs, and he was audacious enough to sell them to students.

Chang Ming first threatened the little girl, then attempted to buy her trust with the promise of profit, saying the beauty medicine wasn't illegal and wouldn't harm anyone if she just tried a little.

Foolishly, Qiu Fei became addicted—foolishly, she became an "ice girl"—and foolishly, she brought the drug to school.

Sometimes, Qiu Fei regretted it. If she hadn't have bullied Yao Yao, perhaps Chang Ming wouldn't have found her, nor would blood and grime have stained her fair skin permanently.

Her neck stiffening, Qiu Fei finished reminiscing and sat up. She felt suffocated in a way normal people couldn't fathom. Blades cut her limbs, and every inch of her flesh felt like it was being eaten by ants.

Desperately, Qiu Fei searched for red ice in her room. She turned it upside down, ripping everything from the pillows to the blankets; the faux feathers and cotton flew aimlessly in the air. The luxurious cabin soon became a chaotic mess, but she found no sign of drugs. Disappointment further triggered a psychological reaction; she felt the imaginary ants crawling along her skin and trembled like she had been electrified.

Qiu Fei couldn't wait any longer and searched outside. She figured a drug dealer like Chang Ming would keep an abundance of supplies somewhere on the ship. However, as soon as she opened the door, that eerie singing voice rang out again.

"Who hides their crimes under the sun, who hides their hands covered in blood..."

Addicts had a heightened sense for anything related to drugs; not even a hint of these substances could escape their sharp gaze. Quickly, Qiu Fei discovered something stuck on the wall in front of her.

Red ice glowed in the dark like amethyst. Its beautiful color shone brilliantly before her eyes. Too bad there was only a tiny bit of it taped down to the wall. Qiu Fei licked the tape but couldn't feel its effects, then cursed in anger beneath her breath. She followed the tape leading down the hallway, searching her way through the darkness.

"Watch out for the knife pressed to your chest, little clueless bird, you'll walk to your death..."

The winds blew more violently, screeching in the sky. The ship shook from the storm. During a night like tonight, this childish singing sounded even more horrifying. Inside all the other bedrooms, the girls held their heads in their hands and hid under their covers. Only Qiu Fei braved the hallways, following the tape toward the deck.

Her eyes, chilling and twisted, were wide open the whole time. She had completely lost her senses; the only thing left in her head was burning, rotten temptation. She completely forgot about the murder and even who she was. Since her addiction had been triggered, she would commit anything from murder to arson to quench her thirst.

Suddenly, Qiu Fei saw something hanging from the flagpole on the bow of the ship, glowing in an alluring, reddish-purple color like a treasured and desirable gem.

The black waters beneath the ship complemented the midnight sky, but the girl was drowning in delusions; she had seen an oasis in the desert, a paradise of happiness. Like a bee enticed by the sweet flowers in the field, she slowly walked toward the flagpole.

At around the same time the singing voice crooned, Xie Lanshan realized something. He had been banging on the door for the whole day, but no one else came down. Not Zuo Ruoqi, not Xiao Gu.

Xie Lanshan gave another bang on the door with no response—as expected. He smiled, licked his lips, and shook his head mockingly. “Oh, Xie Lanshan, you are truly a foolish good man. How could you let these little girls lock up a cop?”

“Who hides their crimes under the sun, who hides their hands covered in blood...”

Xie Lanshan couldn’t sit quietly and wait inside the storage room anymore. He had no idea what was happening outside, but this singing signaled another girl was going to become prey to an “accident.”

He decided at that moment he was going to dislocate his thumb and escape the handcuffs through an unconventional method. Xie Lanshan took a few deep breaths. His right hand gently turned his left thumb to warm up. After he prepared himself mentally, his right hand pressed hard onto his thumb, dislocating it successfully with a sharp crack.

Xie Lanshan’s expression twisted in pain. Sweat rolled down his face, and he cursed a few times.

It always seemed so easy in movies, but the actual mechanism of violently crushing the root of the thumb and forcing a fracture was much more painful than it sounded.

Still, time waited for no one. Xie Lanshan had no choice but to work with the pain. He attempted to pull his left hand out of the handcuffs. The process was excruciating, peeling skin off his wrist and dribbling fresh blood onto the ground. After finally freeing a bloody hand, he turned and kicked the door.

Xie Lanshan was a trained cop; one strong kick loosened up the lock significantly. He didn’t hesitate, took in a deep breath, and gave another hard

kick.

Three times was the charm—the door finally broke.

Hearing cries for aid, Xie Lanshan rushed up to the deck from the lower level.

“Help me! Help!” Qiu Fei, grabbing tightly onto the metal handrail, howled from her throat. Thinking only of the red ice, she had climbed the pole immediately to grab that bag hanging above, but something made her lose her footing once she was a few feet up. It wasn’t enough that it was too slippery to cling to—she had missed a step and fallen but reacted just in time to grab the handrail on the side of the ship.

The girl’s strength was running out and the metal handrails on the ship were also slippery. The black water rumbled beneath her feet; even a strong swimmer wouldn’t be able to save her in these conditions.

In the face of life and death, all longing for drugs vanished. Forced to let go, Qiu Fei closed her eyes in despair, gasping as she dropped. Yet, just as she did, a warm, strong hand grabbed her.

Xie Lanshan held Qiu Fei with his right hand, then pulled her up with both. The girl had a strong will to live; she kept grabbing Xie Lanshan’s fractured left hand, pulling both herself and the man down with her weight. Covered in sweat, he clenched his teeth, withstood the pain, and managed to yank her back up.

Once the girl was saved, everyone else inside the cabin heard the commotion and rushed out one by one except for Yu Xin, who still hid in her room and didn’t dare face the others, and Lu Weiwei, who was still unconscious.

Most ferries and cruises had safety measures to ensure intoxicated passengers wouldn’t fall from the deck and drown; a ship the scale of the *Starglow* should have been well-equipped with these. Suspicious, Xie Lanshan checked the flagpole and metal handrail. As soon as his finger touched the cold metal, he discovered a layer of olive oil. Someone had covered the poles with it.

“I don’t know... why, why I would slip...” Traumatized and still trembling even after being saved, Qiu Fei couldn’t manage to speak clearly. Xiao Gu kindly took a blanket from her room and placed it around the girl, then consoled her gently.

The group went back into the living room inside the main cabin, which was a mess from the commotion earlier; no one had bothered to clean up when their safety was on the line.

“What’s wrong with you? How could you run out alone like that in the middle of the night?! Do you not know how dangerous it is?!” Peng Yixuan seemed only annoyed because her sweet dreams had been disturbed. She

kicked or shoved anything in front of her, throwing around the furniture.

Qiu Fei took a few sips of the hot tea Xiao Gu delivered. The redness in her eyes, burning with a desire for drugs, cleared up. The warmth of the tea rolled down her throat and into her system. Woken by the comfort, all the regret and pain building inside her over the years transformed into frustration and hatred toward Peng Yixuan. Coldly, Qiu Fei looked at her. “It all started because of you. Lu Weiwei and Yu Xin were both dragged down by you, and I almost died because of you too. You better watch out—you’ll be next!”

This was the first time her most loyal lackey had questioned Peng Yixuan’s authority. The young girl turned livid, and the argument escalated.

As time went by, Xie Lanshan walked into the cabin, noting the tape heading out to the deck and the red ice stuck on the flagpole. Every step carefully led to the next, like a craftily woven web of danger. Yu Xin still hid in her room. Lu Weiwei was still unconscious; Zuo Ruoqi and Yu Yangzi had arrived hoping to break up the fight but failed to do so after a few exchanges.

The accusations grew louder and louder. Xie Lanshan’s head and hand both throbbed in pain; acid burned his empty stomach. He licked the corner of his lips and scanned the room full of arguing girls, then silently walked out, returning with a fire extinguisher.

Yu Yangzi called out, “You’re the mastermind—you’re the murderer!”

Meanwhile, Xie Lanshan shook the fire extinguisher violently.

Peng Yixuan shot back, “If I was the culprit, I would have killed you first. Do you think I’d let you stand here and spew bullshit?”

Xie Lanshan took off the cap and lifted the safety lock.

Regaining her energy, Qiu Fei cried out louder than all the others, “I’m waiting too. Let’s see if you die—”

Xie Lanshan grabbed the hose, pressed the handle, and sprayed it at the fussing girls.

Screams overtook the curses, then quickly died down, as no one wanted to swallow a mouthful of foam.

Xie Lanshan sprayed until the extinguisher was emptied, waved the container, and tossed it onto the sofa. Covered in foam, the pretty teenagers closed their mouths, stared at Xie Lanshan with wide eyes, and then turned to each other dumbly. Then shock surfaced on their faces: How could a cop do something like this to underage girls? This was definitely not appropriate! After the collective outrage, the girls stopped arguing; even Peng Yixuan calmed and sat down, wiping her face clean.

Of course, the carrot and stick went hand in hand; Xie Lanshan had decided the conservative and proper investigation methods of the past would not work in this situation. He lifted an eyebrow almost proudly, confirmed the girls had received their share of disciplinary action, then smiled brightly—showing all

his teeth—and shrugged. “All right, girls, everyone listens to me from now on. Any objections?”

He wanted to go over this case from the very beginning, including the fate of the missing girl these teenagers had accidentally revealed.

Before he began taking notes, even Peng Yixuan calmed herself and sat down after wiping her face clean. Xie Lanshan thought about Shen Liufei and how well they worked together to solve difficult cases. The parents of these girls must have called the cops already since they’d been at sea without communication for four days, so the coast guard should have arrived by now. Something on land must have delayed the rescue mission.

But Xie Lanshan couldn’t figure out what. He had used up all his energy to save Qiu Fei, and he was hungry, exhausted, and in pain from his fractured thumb. Nothing could be worse.

He looked outside a window. The muddied sky seemed to have blended into the horizon. The storm had finally arrived. Right now, this million-yuan luxury ship was nothing but a small wooden raft rocking helplessly in the sea. He suddenly understood what Shen Liufei meant by “the Southern region in the snow.”

Hey, Shen Liufei, do you know how much I yearn for you? It’s like I’m stuck in this cursed snowstorm while you’re bathing in a spring field of fresh flowers.

Flower of Evil

The moment he drove out of his residence, Tao Longyue received a call from Shen Liufei. A civilian had reported Xiao Gu lurking around right before the kidnapping. The witness was a real estate agent named Mr. Li; he sold many houses in the area and was a regular in the residential community. He heard an empty unit here had been unoccupied for over a year without an owner or a tenant, so he'd kept it in mind as a potential new home for future buyers. Then one day, he'd taken a client over to it and saw a woman walk out of the supposedly empty home.

Hearing this report, Tao Longyue sped toward the designated location, only to realize Shen Liufei had already arrived. The early October breeze was a little chilly, so Shen Liufei wore a slim-fitted, heavy black leather coat, exposing a bit of the tattoo on his neck. Beside him was his signature black bike, making him look like a model right out of a photoshoot. The man gave off a much different aura than he had at the municipal bureau.

Tao Longyue shot the bike an extra look before shifting his gaze to Shen Liufei, then smiled. "Y'know, you always look so aloof and distant, as if nothing around you is worth your attention. Why are you suddenly so worked up over this case?"

Shen Liufei didn't take this bait. "I suspect Shuxin is hiding here."

Out of professional courtesy, Mr. Li quickly walked up to Tao Longyue to introduce himself. "I'm not trying to boast or anything, but I've been in the real estate business for years. I've seen it all—and I've got a sharp eye for these things. That woman said she's the homeowner, but she kept stuttering and avoiding eye contact, so I knew something was up! Then I saw the news yesterday and realized—isn't that the woman I saw earlier?! I called the cops right away." Knowing Tao Longyue was the captain, Mr. Li turned to the man. "Captain, the news said the reward for giving useful clues is thirty thousand yuan—am I eligible?"

Tao Longyue answered sternly, "That will depend on whether the clue you provide is worth the price."

The community representative and locksmith had accompanied them; he walked up to the residential building. Mr. Li pointed at a two-bedroom unit and opened the door. All the windows and curtains were closed, but a strange stench immediately wafted out. Tao Longyue exchanged a quick glance with

Shen Liufei, pulled out his gun, and carefully walked inside. Mr. Li attempted to follow.

Tao Longyue turned around, scolding, “What are you following me inside for?”

Mr. Li responded firmly, “I have to follow you so I can check if my clue is worth that thirty thousand!”

Frowning, Tao Longyue turned his head back. “If it’s useful, you’ll certainly get your reward. Stay at the door. Don’t scare yourself with whatever’s coming up!”

Mr. Li didn’t seem to mind the strange stench. “What could even frighten me off? I’ve been doing real estate for so long I’ve experienced everything already. I even sold a handful of haunted houses people died in.” As he spoke, he walked toward the living room, sticking his neck out and hoping to join the little party.

Tao Longyue pushed open the bedroom door. Hardly any light shone inside, illuminating the shadow of a person sitting at a desk beside the bed. Judging from the silhouette and outfit, it was a man—a very thin man.

Shen Liufei shot Tao Longyue a glance. “Mr. Yao, we’re the police. We’d like to speak to you about your daughter Yao Yao’s case.”

The man kept his back to them.

Frowning, Shen Liufei shot Tao Longyue another look. Tao Longyue darted out and grabbed the man at the desk. The moment his fingers touched the man’s wrist, Tao Longyue pulled back in shock. The man toppled to the ground.

Mr. Li, secretly following them, saw the man’s face and screamed in horror, then fell back on the floor. All his previous experiences were nothing compared to this.

The face was desiccated, and the eyeballs were almost popping out of the sockets even though the cheeks had completely sunken in. Though still soft, his skin was a horrible yellowish-green.

Shen Liufei rolled down the curtain to finally get a good look at this person—or, more precisely, this withered corpse.

The body was well-preserved. Judging by its facial structure, this was the man they were looking for, Yao Shuxin. An adult body took about six to twelve months to wither completely. In other words, Yao Shuxin could not possibly be the mastermind behind the kidnapping.

Yao Shuxin may have been dead, but Tao Longyue and Shen Liufei found some more clues in his house. The man had left a thick notebook, medical reports, a photo of the family of three, and his unfinished homemade bomb.

In the photo, Yao Yao was still young—about seven to eight years of age. She looked like a quiet and pretty little girl. The smile on her face was

adorably happy and at peace. She stood between her parents, holding each one's hand: her father, Yao Shuxin, and her mother, Zhang Suyun—or as she was now known, Xiao Gu.

Yao Shuxin's notebook detailed his findings of the four girls and Peng Yixuan's family, all of whom he had stalked for the past two years. Yu Xin cheated before her high school exam. Qiu Fei was engaged in selling crystal meth. Lu Weiwei was a diabetes patient... he even recorded the interests and habits of everyone on the list, such as Chang Ming's alcoholism and Peng Cheng's promiscuity. And Peng Hongbin himself wasn't the kindhearted philanthropist the media described him as but rather a monster hidden beneath a gentle façade with a dangerous fetish for schoolgirls.

Shortly after his daughter went missing, Yao Shuxin was diagnosed with stage-four liver cancer. Late-stage liver cancer patients often only had a lifespan of six months, but her father had managed to survive for three years through sheer force of will. The end of the notebook documented the old father's regret, lamenting that he had misunderstood and didn't pay enough attention to his daughter. He also regretted not being able to find her; he knew he wouldn't rest in peace until he could.

Upon returning to the municipal bureau, Su Mansheng autopsied Yao Shuxin and concluded the corpse had been dried through some artificial process. A few organs had been taken out of the body to reduce bacterial growth. Yao Shuxin's tumor had already spread to his bones, which seemed to be the actual cause of death.

Tao Longyue said, "That would explain it. Yao Shuxin wanted to build his own bomb to take revenge on the Peng family but wasn't able to accomplish his goal due to his health in the end. So, he called back his ex-wife, who had already left the country, Zhang Suyun—aka Xiao Gu—to tell her about their daughter and his plan. Xiao Gu mummified him, then prepared to fulfill her ex-husband's will to avenge their daughter. But I still don't understand something." Tao Longyue pondered for a while. "Zhang Suyun already had a fake ID as Xiao Gu, so why did she use Yao Shuxin's name on that letter? Is it because her ex said he wouldn't be able to rest in peace?"

"Yao Shuxin was an expert chemical engineer of a chemical factory. Xiao Gu was a specialist physician in a hospital before she entered the Peng family as a maid." Shen Liufei closed his eyes, deep in thought. "I think aside from fulfilling the man's will, Xiao Gu wanted to convince the police there really was a bomb on the ship to hinder our rescue mission. Then she could buy time."

"In other words, we can send out the helicopters now?"

Shen Liufei seemed to have his own plan. "Let's wait a little longer."

“Then what about Yao Yao—is she still alive?”

Frowning, Shen Liufei lightly sighed. “I’m afraid we have to prepare for the worst.”

Tao Longyue had also expected this outcome and sighed himself. “How unfortunate. She was still so young with a bright future ahead of her.”

As they mourned, Ding Li called. Tao Longyue picked up his phone to hear the update. Very soon after Yao Yao went missing, Peng Yixuan’s father had donated a fully equipped gym and sports arena to St. Noe All-Girls High School, including everything from indoor sports equipment to outdoor grass fields.

Shen Liufei pondered for a moment. “It looks like we need to pay the Peng residence another visit.”

Su Mansheng chimed in from the side, “The news said Peng Hongbin and his wife, Cheng Ya, will be returning to China within the next two days. The Starex Group is the hottest topic all across the country. This might be a chance to strike them at their weakest.”

Tao Longyue perked up. “The pretty-boy show-off of a son wouldn’t talk. The old man has a reputation to protect, so he certainly won’t either.”

Su Mansheng smiled. “Don’t forget there’s also a mother.”

Shen Liufei nodded. “The world may be home to incomprehensible evils, but that isn’t the case for a girl like Peng Yixuan. A government study on underage criminal acts showed over 40 percent of all culprits came from families who spoiled them. She must have a parent who yields to her unconditionally, who wouldn’t dare to discipline her.” He headed outside, leaving Tao Longyue and Su Mansheng alone.

Around Su Mansheng, Tao Longyue’s brain short-circuited; he looked at her with unfiltered adoration and pride. “Wifey’s always right. Too bad I won’t have time to stay with you for dinner these days because of how urgent this case is.”

“Solving the case should be your utmost priority right now.” The two seemed to be developing a good relationship; his comment hadn’t angered Su Mansheng. Instead, she gave him a small smile and fixed Tao Longyue’s collar. Despite her firm, commanding tone of voice, a rare hint of gentleness shone on her cold face. “Don’t let those provincial guys trample over our team here at the Hanhai bureau. We must solve the case before them and show them who’s boss!”

“Yes ma’am! My lady!” Blood boiling with passion and energy, Tao Longyue saluted his wifey. He felt he’d just downed an entire bottle of energy drink and could run across the entire country. Realizing Shen Liufei was still waiting for him, he rushed out of the building.

The weather forecast said to expect a harsh typhoon to reach shore that night, and proving the predictions, the sky darkened the moment they left the municipal bureau. Large flocks of dark rain clouds already covered the sun, and the winds blew harsher than before. Determining which direction the wind blew from was nearly impossible. Objects crashed into each other, sounding off like alarms as they collided. The two rows of flat cedar trees outside of the Hanhai City municipal bureau shivered in the storm and whined in terror, swaying on the old streets in a poetic scene.

Tao Longyue already felt a little embarrassed about his reaction to Su Mansheng. “Sorry, that probably wasn’t a pleasant sight for a single person, huh?”

Shen Liufei gave him an uncaring glance. Despite his words, Captain Tao’s expression was stern; the man wasn’t simply talking about his girlfriend to show off.

Tao Longyue said, “When Xie Lanshan comes back after this case is over, you two can be even more annoying with your PDA.”

Shen Liufei remained expressionless, even as the man’s signature confident smile appeared in his mind’s eye. He withheld that bit of wavering emotion beneath his gaze, suppressing the feeling within his heart.

“Even though I don’t understand what it’s like to be in his shoes, and I don’t know what made that guy decide he’s into men now, I know people change, so I’ll respect his decision.” Tao Longyue sighed, still worried about his buddy on the ship and whether the case could be settled without losing any of the girls. If not, he could say goodbye to this uniform forever.

“It’s also his damn birthday today,” Captain Tao said sourly. “I wonder how he’s doing right now.”

Shen Liufei’s heart tightened in worry and pain, but he didn’t speak up.

The harsh winds silently blew away one sigh of concern. Tao Longyue said, “The Peng residence is pretty far from here. I’ll drive you.”

(ii)

The girls and Xie Lanshan headed to the captain’s lounge to investigate Chang Ming’s death. The room had a great view and open windows; the salty smell of the sea and storm merged with the foul smell of the corpse, but it was tolerable. The girls couldn’t move Chang Ming’s heavy corpse, so they had locked the lounge.

Xie Lanshan covered his nose, doing a quick autopsy. Judging by the lack of blood in the soft tissue at the corpse’s neck and the angle of the blade stabbed into the left side of his chest, the murderer had first choked the man, then stabbed his heart.

Xie Lanshan's gaze fell to the small foreign-brand metal flask on the ground, something Chang Ming always carried with him. Pressing his eyebrows together, he analyzed the situation: Considering Chang Ming's physical size and abilities as a former soldier, the man must not have been able to fight back. But how had the murderer incapacitated him?

Poisoning was the easiest and most discreet method. Chang Ming's lips were bluish, and his throat had swelled, which matched the symptoms of a certain drug—but poisoning would be extremely difficult. Chang Ming ate with everyone else during mealtimes, the utensils were passed out randomly, and if the beef stew was poisoned, everyone who'd eaten from the same pot would have already died.

At this point, Xie Lanshan couldn't figure out the method of the murder and decided to search for more clues. Chang Ming's toolbox was hidden beneath the central control board in the captain's lounge.

There were wires inside, yet Xiao Gu had told him there weren't any on the ship.

The handcuff was still on Xie Lanshan's right wrist. He poked the wire in the cuff's keyhole and successfully removed it after a brief twist and turn. Staring at this piece of wire with suspicion, Xie Lanshan suddenly heard another argument from the cabin.

He followed the voices. The girls had surrounded Peng Yixuan, forcing her to tell the truth about Yao Yao's disappearance. After the last few days of horror, the girls had all reflected on their actions and sought to repent for their wrongdoings. Justice stirred within their hearts, calling them to fight against true evil.

"So what if I buried Yao Yao before she was fully dead? Don't forget—I wasn't even fourteen at the time. I won't be sentenced to death or imprisonment; I only need to be disciplined by my parent or guardian." Despite being cornered, Peng Yixuan remained calm and collected. She noticed Xie Lanshan walk in. "If you don't believe me, you can ask this cop. Am I right?"

"It's true, but just because you can't be punished doesn't mean you're innocent." Xie Lanshan had overheard the conversation from outside and was able to piece together the truth of what had happened that year.

"That's Yao Yao's entire life—don't you even feel a bit regretful? Aren't you scared of karma?" Lu Weiwei had finally woken up, but she was still weak and wobbled as if she would pass out at any moment.

"No, I don't regret it." In face of this betrayal, Peng Yixuan was both angered and amused. She raised an eyebrow. "Serial killers are cool, don't you know? Besides, I was still young, so even if I broke the law a little, nobody could do anything—"

“No, serial killers aren’t cool. The media loves to package these characters as highly intelligent and attractive, but those are lies!” Xie Lanshan’s expression grew cold. “Criminal psychology explains the Macdonald triad—a set of three factors predictive of serial killers—bedwetting as a child, arson, and animal cruelty. If you genuinely believe serial killers are cool, then clearly you couldn’t hold your pee for a very long time as a child and caused lots of trouble for the maids washing your bedsheets.”

Some girls giggled.

Taken aback, Peng Yixuan quickly showed her true colors. “I only regret not killing the rest of you ugly fools back when I had the chance! Did you know? She woke up once after you all left, and my parents got into a big argument about how to deal with her, so I choked that bitch to death right in front of them—”

Even Xie Lanshan couldn’t have foreseen this truth. He frowned and slapped her before she could finish.

Peng Yixuan was dumbstruck. She’d grown up with all the privileges in the world; no one had dared to touch her ever since she was a child. Finally, she came back to her senses, crying while holding her face. “You—you dare hit me?! Not even my parents have slapped me before. Who gave you the right, you lowlife?!”

“You’re twisted and evil precisely because you lack discipline,” Xie Lanshan said with a solemn expression. “This slap wasn’t for your parents—it’s for justice.”

“Don’t forget you’re a cop. I’m going to sue you! I swear I will once I get out of here!” Never before had she been humiliated like this; Peng Yixuan’s face twisted as she cried out, “You can say goodbye to your job—I’m going to ruin your whole career!”

“Do as you please.” Xie Lanshan smiled, unruffled. “I can give you my ID number right now if you want.”

The girls laughed again—the slap had relieved some of their frustration and fear.

Peng Yixuan had never appeared so unsightly before; her expression darkened instantly, but within a matter of seconds, she smiled again. It was sly but sweet, eerie, and twisted. The sight sent chills through everyone around her.

“So what? Even if I die, I wouldn’t ever have to go to jail.” Peng Yixuan showed the self-inflicted injuries on her wrist. “Death isn’t even that scary. Besides, now that we have a cop here, everyone’s safe. As soon as I go back home, I’ll arrange to leave the country, and the rest of my life will still be bright and beautiful. But what about you guys? Birth determines everything. You all should feel sorry for yourselves.”

Though angered, the girls couldn't argue back. Peng Yixuan was right.

"We don't want to stay with a coldhearted monster like you." When Yu Xin spoke up, all the girls agreed.

"I don't want to stay with you losers and terrorists either. I'm going back to my room to sleep." Seeking solitude on the ship before the danger was gone wasn't smart, but her pride stopped her from conceding to anyone else. Peng Yixuan walked off to return to her comfortable and luxurious master cabin. Before she left the lounge, she glanced back and smiled at Xie Lanshan. "Mr. Policeman, you still have to protect me no matter how coldhearted I am, right? I'm still an underage girl after all."

"You're the evilest and most twisted little girl I've ever met." Xie Lanshan's eyebrows pressed down. "No. To be more precise, you're a monster."

"You humble me." The girl accepted those words as a compliment. Her smile, a perfect mixture of pure innocence and pure malice, was very pretty. This girl was a flower of evil; bullying, afflicting harm, and violence were her nourishment. The more negative the human emotion, the prouder she bloomed. Finally, she turned and actually left with a grin on her face.

As soon as they saw the news in China, Peng Hongbin and Cheng Ya both returned. Cheng Ya's tears rolled down her face. Even the most famous queen of the silver screen was nothing but an average mother once the glow of a superstar wore off. She repeated in a frenzy to the cops, "She's only a child. Please save her."

Throughout the entire visit to the Peng residence, Captain Tao remained silent, putting all his trust in Shen Liufei. The artist's voice was deep and soothing, like fine wine, making every word strangely persuasive. "I'm afraid we won't be able to. There are over a thousand tons of gasoline and a powerful bomb on the ship. If the police barge in with a rescue team and angers the culprit—well, we won't want to see the results." Shen Liufei didn't reveal Yao Shuxin's death or the fake bomb. He stared into Cheng Ya's eyes. "But you can save her."

"What do you need me to do? I'll do anything in my power!" Cheng Ya anxiously said.

"Our only option to ensure your daughter's safe return is finding Yao Yao's corpse and letting her father bury the body peacefully," Shen Liufei said carefully with a grave expression. "That's why you're the only one who can save her."

Cheng Ya's rosy cheeks instantly turned pale. "I don't understand what you're saying. My daughter has nothing to do with that dead girl—"

Shen Liufei interrupted her harshly. “Your daughter wasn’t even fourteen when it happened, which means she will not be required to serve any legal sentence even if the bureau reopens the old case. As for myself, I personally believe karma punishes evil, just in the same way classical novels end. Letting these underage criminals sink to the bottom of the ocean is a much fairer punishment than a chance to repent and redeem themselves, but someone important to me is also on that ship; I also long to see him, to embrace and kiss him again, just as you wish to see your daughter.” Shen Liufei didn’t shy away from his feelings in front of Tao Longyue and admitted, “I really miss him, so I want him to return safely.”

“I don’t know... I really don’t know...” Cheng Ya’s eyes glistened with tears. Even if she was fighting to deny it, she was wavering.

“Your daughter is still on that ship. She could be or has already been injured, struggling to wait for rescue.” Shen Liufei glanced at the muddied sky outside. “The typhoon is arriving.”

“I—I—” Cheng Ya’s lips trembled as if she had finally made a difficult decision—only to be interrupted once again.

Peng Hongbin walked into the room. He was a man with broad shoulders and a natural air of authority around him. He nodded at Shen Liufei courteously, then humbly said, “My wife hasn’t been in her best headspace since learning about our daughter’s kidnapping.” Peng Hongbin stated the entire Starex Group would cooperate with the police, but as for the missing girl, they really had no clue what happened to her.

“That’s all from me.” Standing up, Shen Liufei bid Peng Hongbin farewell, then bowed toward Cheng Ya. “Mrs. Peng, you know how to contact me.”

After exiting, Shen Liufei stood outside the door of the Peng household.

An explosive and heated argument echoed within the residence, then a mother’s agonized cries.

(iii)

The satellite phone line and wireless networks on the ship had indeed been tampered with. After checking the corpse and discovering the cause of the malfunction, Xie Lanshan’s suspicion of Xiao Gu grew a little stronger. He presumed the woman wouldn’t dare cause any more trouble with a cop around, but regardless, the most important task right now was safely sending the girls back home.

“You little girls sure don’t know how to deal with emergencies very well. You can reconnect a cut wire.” He began repairing the wireless equipment with Chang Ming’s toolbox. Huddled together outside the door of the captain’s lounge, the girls watched him work. They weren’t well-versed in this sort of

equipment and couldn't do anything beyond stare, even if the tools were at hand. No one dared to step into the cabin; Chang Ming's corpse was inside, and the foul smell loomed in the air.

Xie Lanshan pulled the copper wires from inside the cut rubber tube and carefully reconnected them, then taped it all up with vinyl. The power returned, and the equipment screeched in unison. Then, after a loud snapping sound, everything broke worse than before.

Though he kept working diligently for a while, he didn't seem to yield any results. Yu Xin rolled her eyes and said, "Hey, Mr. Policeman, are you sure you know how to work this thing?"

"Soooooooorry," Xie Lanshan sang with a pretty smile on his face for the girls. "It'll be fixed soon. Just give me a little longer."

Eventually, he discovered the circuit capacitor was broken. After replacing it with a new one, the satellite connection finally returned to the ship.

It was 10 P.M. already. Shouldering the mass media's attention and the criticisms of their leaders, the violent crimes unit worked overtime every day and the unit had just suffered another frenzied day of work. After receiving no news from the bureau, the families patiently waiting at home returned to demand updates.

A sudden ringing tune struck during the silent night. Ding Li picked up the phone and stuttered in shock as she heard the speaker. "C-Captain Tao, it... it's from Senior Xie!"

Rushing forward, Shen Liufei picked up the call before Tao Longyue could react. "Xie Lanshan?"

Xie Lanshan's heart raced as soon as he heard this familiar voice, and a stream of warmth filled him. The corner of his lips lifted instinctively. "Oh, and who is this?"

"Let's talk business." Assured the other was safe from his playful tone of voice, Shen Liufei also smiled. "Are the girls all right?"

"One of the girls with a history of diabetes is suffering from ketoacidosis. She still has symptoms and needs medical attention immediately, but the rest are fine." Xie Lanshan added in his mind: *They aren't just fine—they're the biggest sources of trouble on board.*

Shen Liufei let out a sigh of relief. "Just a warning, be careful of that teacher on your ship. She's Yao Yao's mother."

"I figured as much." Turning his head, Xie Lanshan checked to make sure Xiao Gu still stood furthest away from the captain's lounge. Her gaze was cloudy and mournful, as if she had exhausted her energy and aged many years over these few days. "By the way, the ship's captain, Chang Ming, is dead. There's a massive supply of crystal meth hidden on this ship; the man acted

suspiciously when he was alive, so I'm guessing it's his."

"No wonder." Recalling Peng Cheng's strange reaction, Shen Liufei wasn't too surprised. The Peng family had more than one secret; this could be another important breakthrough to solving Yao Yao's case.

With all the reports made, Xie Lanshan had a sudden thought. "Say, I think I'm about a step away from locking in on the culprit. Is there anything you want to say to me?"

"Come back safely."

"And?"

"Happy birthday."

Still not hearing the line he was hoping to receive, Xie Lanshan asked again, "Anything else?"

Shen Liufei didn't answer. After a brief silence, long enough to nurture some food for thought, he finally opened his mouth to say "I" but the unreliable connection cut off at the most critical moment. Xie Lanshan cursed.

Almost as soon as he spoke up, Zuo Ruoqi's scream echoed on the ship. "Everyone, look!"

The group turned to the source of the sound. A giant wave stood above the natural sea level, surging toward their ship at a calamitous speed.

Along with the roar of thunder, the typhoon had finally arrived.

Lightning struck, lighting the gloomy sky a deathly pale white. The wireless connection was once again cut off. A hub of violent waves and tides closed in on the ship. The top of the wall of water curled down dangerously, ready to drop at any moment. Even the most luxurious ship on the vast ocean was nothing more than a little floating raft that could easily be devoured by the giant tide.

Though as terrified as everyone else on the ship, Xie Lanshan quickly called out, "All of you, go put on life jackets immediately!"

The girls shrieked, but the even sharper sound of the ocean water wiped out the sound of their voices. The violent storm outside shook the entire body of the ship. Even Peng Yixuan, who had locked herself up in her bedroom, rushed out and joined the group. In the end, she was still a terrified young girl. The violent storm outside shook the entire vessel; Peng Yixuan practically glued herself to Xie Lanshan in her fear. Convinced someone among the girls wanted to kill her, she refused to stay with them, so she could only rely on the police officer to save her if she fell into the ocean.

Xiao Gu quickly passed around life jackets to the girls, but she visibly hesitated as she reached Peng Yixuan. "Put it on. Be careful."

Since he'd entered the police academy, Xie Lanshan had always been the most hardworking student, even enduring another round of harsh training after joining Sui Hong's unit. He was a well-rounded fighter who could defend

others, skydive professionally, and even shoot a target blind. The one thing he wasn't trained in was sailing a ship, since the luxury sport reserved for the rich had little use on duty.

Yet the situation was dire; his temples throbbed from stress as he eyed the deadly wall of ocean water.

Well, he had never sailed a cruise ship, but he *had* steered a ferry before.

He quickly determined the direction of the wind; the ship was parked directly on the route of the typhoon and needed to head away immediately.

Taking a deep breath to gather his focus, Xie Lanshan turned the ship's wheel harshly to catch the wind coming from the right side to sail off at full speed—and directly into the water wall. The glass windows of the control room couldn't withstand the raging tides and shattered. Frigid water crashed into Xie Lanshan's face along with the shards of glass like the heaviest slap in the face of his life.

Under the violent assaults of the wave, the wheel beneath his hands strained. His thumb throbbed; his face was covered in open cuts; his mouth filled with the bitter, sweet, and salty taste of blood and seawater. Clenching his teeth, he forcefully sailed the ship out of the typhoon's strike zone.

The ship wobbled as another strike of lightning came down, and the waves still loudly screeched outside—but at least they had left the direct path of the typhoon and survived the worst of the danger. Xie Lanshan let go of the steering wheel and walked into the living room where the girls were gathered. Leaning against the door, he panted heavily and rolled up his sleeves to wipe his stinging face, then realized he was completely drenched.

Yu Yangzi stared at him, dumbfounded, then walked closer to Xie Lanshan, and softly said, "Mr. Policeman, I just remembered something. I don't know if this will be helpful."

Ears still buzzing with the sound of the rain and waves, Xie Lanshan couldn't hear a word. "What did you say?!"

"I said!" Yu Yangzi also raised her voice. "Mr. Policeman! I just remembered something to help with the case!"

"Don't call me that. It makes me sound old—I'm more like your big brother." Xie Lanshan gave Yu Yangzi a playful little bop on the head. "What did you find out?"

Rubbing the spot he'd smacked, Yu Yangzi leaned in beside Xie Lanshan's ear. "The day after I fought with my sister, I stayed with Xiao Gu for the night. I found a half-open antibiotic pill under her bed, so I wrapped it up with a napkin and kept it with me."

Something clicked. The mystery of how the culprit poisoned Chang Ming was now solved, a disulfiram reaction caused by the mixture of cephalosporin and alcohol. The severity depended on the amount of antibiotics and alcohol

the person consumed. A light poisoning could cause nausea and fatigue, while a more severe case could cause shortness of breath and even medical shock. It was clear that the culprit had utilized Chang Ming's alcoholism against him and placed a massive amount of antibiotics into the pot of beef stew. The girls could consume antibiotics with no adverse reactions, but once Chang Ming reached for his vodka, he would have been incapacitated. A severe disulfiram reaction could render the man vulnerable and make him an easy kill.

He recalled that day they ate on the ship. Xiao Gu was the one who prepared the food and stopped him from drinking with Chang Ming at the dinner table.

Xie Lanshan lifted his gaze and scanned the cabin. Aside from Peng Yixuan, who still clung to his arm, the rest of the girls wore bright orange life jackets and held each other's trembling hands like little ducklings.

Only Xiao Gu had disappeared.

(iv)

While the drama on the ship unfolded, Chi Jin and Ling Yun were still investigating the death of Tao Jing. Eventually, they tracked down two drug dealers and arrested them, but the suspects offered more evidence in exchange for a shorter sentence. They revealed another supplier above them; they were unsure of the dealer's exact identity, only that they were part of the Starex Group. Yet the company owned too many cargo ships, meaning that locking down the exact ship carrying drugs would be impossible without large-scale action that would alert the ultimate culprit. The agents had no choice but to wait for another time to strike.

The morning after the typhoon, Tao Longyue uncovered another clue. The captain of the *Starglow*, Chang Ming, was not only the right-hand man of Peng Hongbin but also a vice director of a cargo company under the Starex Group. His regular routes circled Southeast Asia. When he wasn't at work, he often spent time hanging out with Peng Cheng. In fact, he had just returned from a long cargo voyage before captaining the cruise for Peng Yixuan's birthday.

Combining the findings of the elite forces' investigations and Tao Longyue's new clues, the team narrowed in on Chang Ming as their prime suspect. The red-ice case soon took shape before their eyes.

The two agents from the provincial branch had strikingly different personalities. Chi Jin was cold like an iceberg, while Ling Yun was warm like the spring sun. Chi Jin never bothered giving people in the municipal bureau more attention than necessary, while Ling Yun was always friendly to Tao Longyue. After hearing Tao Longyue's report, he responded with a sunny

smile, “Captain Tao, that’s an amazing find.”

“No big deal. It’s just part of the job.” Tao Longyue’s gaze shifted toward Chi Jin’s stony face on the side. “Captain Chi, I didn’t make this discovery on my own. Xie Lanshan called the office last night from the *Starglow*. He gave us the intel—the same way he did when he was undercover in the Golden Triangle.”

Captain Tao was sure these good words would improve Chi Jin’s impression of Xie Lanshan, but Chi Jin only responded coldly, “Pure luck.”

Ling Yun asked, “Do you think Peng Hongbin would know about his employees engaging in the drug trade?”

Chi Jin answered, “It’s hard to say with the information we have right now, but regardless, the cargo business of the Starex Group must be locked down for thorough investigation.”

“Can’t escape the web of the law. He deserves it.” Ling Yun nodded. “Based on the sample we confiscated, the red ice is extremely refined. It must have been produced in a lab. Even a tiny bit of the substance can easily ruin a person’s life, but our province has a well-trained narcotics unit with a long history, especially when it comes to intercepting trade. How were they able to ship the drug in and out of the country?”

“Regardless of virtue’s height, the devil always towers higher. These drug dealers will do anything for money; we can never let our guard down.” Chi Jin got up quickly. “Regardless, we need to investigate the Starex Group’s maritime shipping companies immediately!”

The kidnapping and red-ice cases created a complex web of conspiracy. Even if Tao Longyue and Chi Jin had a rocky relationship, the two banded together in the face of these difficult cases. The police cars arrived at the pier. Police dogs first sniffed around the ships, but they found nothing. Ling Yun seemed disappointed. He had expected to catch fresh drugs, but all cargo had already been removed. “Are we a step too late?”

Chi Jin had his own idea. Almost as soon as his cargo arrived on land, Chang Ming left with Peng Yixuan. If the drugs were hidden in the cargo, and Young Master Peng ordered him to conceal the drugs on the *Starglow* for safekeeping, Chang Ming must have protected it somehow. Therefore, the drugs must still be on that ship. After carefully inspecting the cargo, Chi Jin suddenly said, “I’m going for a dive.”

Tao Longyue was shocked.

Ling Yun also seemed puzzled and asked Chi Jin twice, “Are you sure?”

Chi Jin nodded. “In the South American trade routes, there’s a unique method of hiding drugs called the ‘torpedo,’ where the drugs are kept inside a sealed box and attached to the bottom of the ship. It ensures they could safely

smuggle the drugs even if the ships happen to get caught in security checks."

Because Chi Jin disliked Xie Lanshan, Tao Longyue assumed the man was all talk and simply envious of his ex-teammate. He'd underestimated the man's experience as a special agent in antidrug operations. However, this simple explanation cleared up the fog surrounding the mystery of the hidden drugs.

Surprised, Tao Longyue looked up at the gloomy sky, which was gray. The rain was heavy, and the waves rumbled violently. The typhoon had blown past the coastlines and onto land, so the water's surface was already cloudy from the storm. Navigating in the darkness underwater would be difficult. "We should leave this to a professional. Let's go find a diver to help out."

Chi Jin shot him a cold glance. "I'm a professional."

Ling Yun laughed, his handsome face carrying a childlike and innocent aura. When he smiled, his eyes glistened like a chummy boy from next door. "A professional diver may be an expert exclusively for sport, but special agents like us hone our skills in every area. Don't worry, Captain Tao. He's a guy licensed to dive."

Tao Longyue tried to interrupt again, but Chi Jin said, annoyed, "Didn't we agree on this already? We won't interfere with each other's cases. I'm here to solve mine on drugs. You go save your little girls."

Within a matter of minutes, Chi Jin changed into diving gear. The tight black suit traced the well-defined lines of his muscles.

As classmates in the police academy, Ling Yun and Chi Jin were both die-hard fans of World of Warcraft. Upon joining Sui Hong's Blue Fox Commandos, they'd quickly taught their other teammates to shout, "For the Horde!" right before a highly dangerous operation. The rallying cry was both a reference to the game and a call to protect their country and people, encouraging one another to safely accomplish their missions. The adult men would rather keep sentimental words in their hearts than say them out loud and embarrass themselves.

But Chi Jin changed the slogan.

Pressing a hand to his chest, he said softly before putting on his oxygen mask: *For my captain.*

The sky was an ashy gray like the bottom of a frying pan. The tall winds on the ocean raged, crashing onto the heavy cargo ships. Chi Jin had been underwater for a while; even Ling Yun was growing a bit anxious. Tao Longyue pinched out his cigarette and walked in circles as he waited.

Another long while passed. Finally, a silhouette appeared from the waters and Ling Yun's eyes lit up. He gestured toward Chi Jin to ask, "Did you find it?"

Navigating the dark waters under this weather was extremely difficult; fighting against the waves consumed stamina too. Exhausted, Chi Jin still gave a thumbs-up of confirmation.

Tao Longyue and Ling Yun quickly pulled him back ashore.

Chi Jin took off his oxygen mask and a portion of his diving equipment, panting heavily as he lay on land. After only what felt like the blink of an eye, the man caught his breath. He crawled up from the ground and said to Tao Longyue, "Find a diver and ask them to bring an underwater gas cutter. I found a suspicious metal box attached to the submarine valve—it's most likely red ice."

The divers quickly arrived with their professional equipment and tools. After another long while of combined effort, the diving team successfully carried a metal box up from the sea.

The box indeed held bags of beautiful purple-red crystals—roughly fifty million yuans' worth. The find easily made this the biggest drug-smuggling case in Hanhai history.

Chi Jin said, "It's clear this drug-trade network is based in Hanhai. They ship their supplies from Southeast Asia, then sell them to the rest of the country. Considering the scale of this case, the Starex Group shipping branch will need to be locked down for a thorough investigation as of today. Please ensure all related parties cooperate with the police."

(v)

"The wind's dying down—does that mean you can sail the ship home now?"

The wind had certainly calmed, but the tides still raced, and black seawater pushed at the body of the ship, shaking the entire vessel. The cockpit was severely damaged as well. The girls worried about the situation and turned to Xie Lanshan, hoping the man would take them all home.

Xie Lanshan was suffering from another headache. Horrifying, stinging pain raced inside his skull. He sat on the sofa with a hand over his forehead as he carefully adjusted his breathing. After a few seconds of rest, he crossed his fingers and pressed both hands on his forehead. "I forgot how to sail."

Baffled, Peng Yixuan screamed, "You forgot? Are you kidding me? Do you think this is some game with cool-down time for each skill?"

"I really forgot." Even Xie Lanshan was surprised. During the life-or-death situation earlier, sailing had come so naturally, but now, he couldn't recall the basics. He stood up from the sofa despite his horrible headache. "Don't worry. The police department already confirmed our location. The rescue team will be on the way as soon as the typhoon passes. Xiao Gu is now the prime

suspect of the case, and it's of utmost importance we find her."

Even if the chances were slim, with Xiao Gu's identity exposed, he was afraid she would choose to drag everyone down by switching on the bomb or resorting to some other destructive action.

"Let me go with you!" Zuo Ruoqi spoke up first.

"Me too, me too!" Yu Yangzi followed up.

One by one, the girls offered to help the man; only Peng Yixuan stood at a distance behind everyone. "I knew that bitch was up to no good!"

Xie Lanshan hesitated. Leaving the girls with Peng Yixuan could cause more trouble for everyone, so he agreed. "Someone needs to take care of Lu Weiwei. Zuo Ruoqi, you have experience, so you stay behind. The rest of you split up into pairs to search; don't try to do anything if you find Xiao Gu. Just call me over."

Of course, no one wanted to be in the same group as Peng Yixuan. Standing neatly in a row, the other girls stared at her with hatred and disgust. Peng Yixuan wasn't interested in assisting either. She slid in front of Xie Lanshan like an alluring butterfly, embraced his arm, and rested her face on his shoulder. "That bitch must have come for me because of her stupid daughter, so you should stay by my side and protect me. After all, one year of my dad's taxes paid for the salaries of your entire bureau."

"Xiao Gu had many chances to isolate each and every one of you, yet she didn't take advantage of that. She cared for Lu Weiwei by herself and stayed in the same room as Yu Yangzi. She even warned me to not drink at the dinner table, partly to hide how she planned to poison the captain, but also because she didn't want to kill me by accident. Really, she's only a mother at her wit's end and doesn't seem to intend to murder anyone on a whim." Xie Lanshan pried his arm from Peng Yixuan's grip. "As for you, staying here with Lu Weiwei and Zuo Ruoqi will be safer."

Peng Yixuan cursed, not bothering to lower her voice. "Useless cop!"

Ignoring the complaint, Xie Lanshan ordered the girls to pick up items like baseball bats for self-defense. Peng Yixuan pulled a sharp knife from somewhere, sparking another round of screams from the other girls.

The blade shone coldly like the surface of ice. Peng Yixuan held the knife proudly in front of the girls. "If Xiao Gu really wants to hurt me, I can stab her to death. It'd be considered self-defense, so it's not a crime."

Yet despite her harsh words and the pure evilness in her nature that seemed too malevolent for her age, she was still a young girl. Shaking in anxiety, Peng Yixuan sat on the sofa with both hands clutching the knife. Xie Lanshan gave her one more glance before telling Yu Yangzi and the rest of the girls, "All right, the rest of you split into groups of three and follow me."

Yu Yangzi followed first. Xie Lanshan asked her, “What happened to the camera you always carry?”

Yu Yangzi pouted. “I lost it somewhere because of how chaotic it was the last few days.”

The group searched from the top deck, carefully scouring every level and every corner, going all the way to the bottom of the ship with no luck. But the winds and waves were still violent outside; Xiao Gu couldn’t possibly have left.

Xie Lanshan suddenly heard the girls’ screams—first Qiu Fei, then Yu Xin, and then Yu Yangzi. Their voices pierced through even the thickest walls of the ship.

But these didn’t sound like the screams of girls in danger, even though they were deafeningly loud to Xie Lanshan. He followed the sounds to the three girls, who weren’t too far away. They stood dumbly in front of the storage room he had been locked in. The girls turned their heads to him, stuttering, “We... found her...”

Pushing the girls aside, Xie Lanshan walked in.

They really had found Xiao Gu.

A twisted, pale face stared back at him. A small stream of blood rolled down from the corner of her lips; her eyes stared blankly, open wide. Her hands dangled at the sides of her body, swinging lightly back and forth from above the ground.

She’d hung herself.

Xiao Gu had been standing on something, then kicked it away, making it seem like a suicide. Stepping on the same object she used, Xie Lanshan untied the noose. He carefully took Xiao Gu’s corpse down and laid it on the ground.

A folded piece of paper dropped from Xiao Gu’s pocket. The contents of the letter were her confession: she had helped her ex-husband Yao Shuxin investigate everyone on the ship; she’d put the antibiotic in the food to poison Chang Ming and killed him. She also confessed to switching Lu Weiwei’s insulin with sugar and putting the meth bottle on Qiu Fei’s bed, attempting to lure her to fall into the sea... all of this was for the sake of finding out the truth behind her daughter’s disappearance and to punish the girls for their sins. The letter was short, but every word was written in the blood of a mother’s pain and love.

Humans are humans because they can determine right and wrong, good and evil, and make their own decisions. No matter what the reason, taking the life of another person is a shameful and condemnable act. I am sincerely sorry and willing to offer my life to pay for my own sins. I also wish for Officer Xie to find my Yao Yao soon and request she may be buried in peace with my

husband and me. She lived on the edge every day when she was alive, so please allow her to have a full family to rely on after death.

That was the last of Xiao Gu's will. His heart heavy, Xie Lanshan took a while to pull himself back up to check the corpse.

Something was strange about the body. Opening Xiao Gu's mouth, he noticed she had bitten her tongue off, causing the blood to drip from the corner of her lips. But suicide by hanging often left the corpse with a tongue sticking out of their mouth; it wasn't normal for the person to have bitten off their tongue during the process. On Xiao Gu's neck, beside the bruised line befitting a traditional hanging, a few fresh scratch marks marred her throat. Lifting her hands, Xie Lanshan discovered a large amount of skin embedded under her nails. One nail was also broken, which was a clear sign she had struggled desperately before death.

A person committing suicide wouldn't struggle so violently.

How could this happen? The contents of the letter also further deepened the mystery. Xie Lanshan fell into deep thought; was there more to Xiao Gu's suicide? Was there another true mastermind?

The girls finally calmed down and discussed Xiao Gu's death. Yu Xin concluded, "Looks like Miss Xiao repented for her sins by suicide."

Yu Yangzi agreed with her cousin and nodded, then sighed. "She must have known the cop here could easily expose her true identity, so she couldn't continue carrying out her plan. I think she really just wanted justice for her daughter. That's so unfortunate..."

Qiu Fei said nothing but instead of anger at the woman for almost killing her, her expression held regret. As Xie Lanshan had said, Xiao Gu wasn't evil, merely a mother at her wit's end.

"Ha ha, great, the culprit committed suicide!"

Everyone turned their heads to the cheery voice that contrasted with the gloomy atmosphere. Peng Yixuan had arrived; behind her were Lu Weiwei and Zuo Ruoqi. They had likely been summoned by the screaming.

"The culprit's dead, so we're all safe. We just need to wait patiently for our rescue." Peng Yixuan pushed the Yu cousins aside and stuck her head inside the storage room. After she confirmed Xiao Gu's death, she lazily yawned. "Hey, stop hanging around. The case is over. Let's go back and sleep."

After days of terror and this violent storm, the girls were certainly tired. Since the culprit had ended her own life, the girls also felt a weight off their shoulders and got ready to leave.

"No, this isn't over yet," said Xie Lanshan after remaining quiet the whole time. He stood and looked sternly at the six girls. "There are still suspicious aspects to Xiao Gu's death; the real culprit is likely among the six of you here."

Fragments of Character

On the evening of the sixth day, Shen Liufei once again paid a visit to the Peng residence. He came by himself this time with no Tao Longyue around.

As parents, both Peng Hongbin and Cheng Ya knew their son had screwed up. The fifty-million-yuan illegal drug shipments had become Hanhai City's first-ever mass drug-trade case. The Starex Group's sea cargo industry was completely locked down, and eight related parties, including Peng Cheng, had been taken into the municipal bureau as suspects. On top of that, only a few hours remained in Yao Shuxin's supposed countdown to blow up the ship.

For the Peng family, their daughter's life was in danger, and their son was a key suspect in a massive drug case. Cheng Ya had an explosive argument with her husband the day after Shen Liufei's first visit. Peng Hongbin had to protect the reputation of the entire Starex Group, but her shattered heart longed for nothing more than the safety of her children.

"You dare cry right now? They wouldn't have gotten into this mess if you didn't spoil them so much!" Peng Hongbin was livid. Despite using all of his social connections to find out about his son's case in the municipal bureau, he'd received nothing more than a grim and pessimistic response.

Shen Liufei said calmly, "Your son refused to admit his association with the drug trade, but he personally signed the unusual route change requests Chang Ming made while sailing around the Golden Triangle. His bank account also showed massive incoming and outgoing transactions to mysterious sources. The investigation is still in progress, but he is undoubtedly in trouble."

Peng Hongbin's expression grew grave, but he refused to spill the truth. He maintained his courteous but formal tone. "I personally will not answer any questions you ask. I refuse to believe my son would voluntarily involve himself in drug trafficking; the Starex Group makes an annual profit of several billion. He isn't lacking in funds and has no reason to partake in such criminal activity."

"Is that so? CEO Peng, perhaps you've been too consumed by work to truly understand his." Shen Liufei tossed several photos before Peng Hongbin's eyes and handsomely raised a hand, gesturing for the older man to take a look.

The photo seemed to have been taken by paparazzi while Peng Cheng was hanging out at a bar, but the angle was clear enough. Peng Cheng cuddled up to some young women, enjoying ice. The table held a meth bottle and a pipe

often used for smoking. In another photo, Peng Cheng blew out a cloud of white smoke, his handsome face eerily twisted and grotesque.

Peng Hongbin cursed beneath his breath; the hand holding the photo trembled. Seeing his wife drenched in tears, he turned his fire at her. “Stop crying! You keep crying and bringing bad luck into the house!”

Instead, Cheng Ya cried harder. “Do something, do something...”

“What can I do?” Perhaps his wife’s desperate cries affected him. Letting out a long sigh, Peng Hongbin stripped himself of the cold armor of a successful businessman, finally displaying a hint of a father’s fatigue and weakness. “I want to find a lawyer for my son. I need the best.”

“Of course,” Shen Liufei responded calmly with his knowledge of due process. “However, even the best advocates are not allowed to research relevant documentation and evidence during the investigation process. You can apply for bail preceding the trial, but a fifty-million-yuan drug-trade case will not be easy to win.”

“Can’t do this, can’t do that, I don’t even know what my son did, let alone what you’re even here for!” Peng Hongbin had never experienced this kind of helplessness in his life. Then he noticed something abnormal. “Don’t you police always handle cases in pairs? What happened to Captain Tao?”

“I’m not a cop, merely an outsourced advisor the municipal bureau hired. To be quite honest, I have no interest in your son’s alleged drug case. I only want to know where that girl is buried.”

Peng Hongbin quickly picked out the unspoken words. “This is a trade?”

Shen Liufei lifted his head slightly. “You can think of it that way.”

Puzzled, Peng Hongbin studied him. “Why are you so interested in that girl’s case?”

Shen Liufei pressed his eyebrows together slightly, his expression sincere and grave. “I’ve said it already—someone very important to me is also on that ship. I haven’t heard anything from him over the last few days, and I’m not willing to let him risk his life.”

Peng Hongbin was still suspicious. “And your point is?”

“Tell me where Yao Yao’s body is kept. I can save the lives of all the girls on that ship—including your daughter’s.” Leaning forward, Shen Liufei stared at Peng Hongbin’s old, muddied eyes. “The government considers providing important clues to help save lives an act of service. Such a selfless act could help commute a sentence.”

Almost as soon as Shen Liufei dropped the last syllable, Cheng Ya called out, “Tell him, hurry, tell him!”

“But these kinds of merit-based...” he paused, then started again, “I heard only the suspect can obtain this privilege. Family members can’t help...” At his wife’s begging, Peng Hongbin was considering the possibility.

“That’s easy. After receiving permission from the police, I can arrange for a call from Peng Cheng, then request for the family to provide the related information.”

The weather was still stormy, but because the city was right in the eye, the sun appeared briefly as it sank toward the horizon. From outside the window, twilight painted the trees in a layer of warm gold and red. Another day was about to pass.

Shen Liufei glanced at his watch. “There are only a few hours left. Your daughter’s life is on the line, and your son’s future also depends on your decision; I really don’t know what is holding you back.”

Cheng Ya had completely broken down, virtually kneeling before her husband. “You know it! You had Chang Ming do the burial... just tell him already!”

The sun sank another degree, the sky grew a shade darker, and his wife’s cries shattered his heart. Peng Hongbin closed his eyes, letting out a long breath of air, and said, “After Yixuan created this mess, I donated a sports arena to the school. The girl... is buried under the outdoor field.”

Shen Liufei was slightly taken aback. Despite hoping to find Yao Yao’s corpse, he had also subconsciously hoped Peng Hongbin would deny it until the end. Part of him had still hoped the poor girl was alive. He closed his eyes. For the girl who’d suffered a brutal and silent death that spring, and for her parents who resorted to crime to demand justice—he allowed a single tear to roll down his cheek. He then turned around and left the household.

The moment the door opened, Peng Cheng appeared. He was dressed finely, and his expression was proud and lively. Seeing Shen Liufei, he showed only a hint of surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Awestruck, Peng Hongbin stuttered in an extremely unprofessional and almost embarrassing manner, “H-how did you get back?”

“I wasn’t involved in the drug trade, so of course I could come back after I finished giving my witness account to the police.” Nonchalantly, Peng Cheng kicked his shoe and walked into the living room, even more puzzled to see his mother kneeling on the floor, her face drenched in tears. “Mom? What are you doing on the floor? Why are you crying? Are you worried about sis? Don’t worry. I just heard from the police there’s a pretty reliable cop aboard. They already got in contact with him two days ago, and aside from Chang Ming, who died, the rest of the girls are fine—”

Now Peng Hongbin realized he had been played. Unable to even muster up a complaint, he could only glare at Shen Liufei.

Shen Liufei smiled lightly. “Young Master Peng’s cigar is quite fine, but our bureau’s photoshopping skills are also impressive.” Capturing a sly old fox wasn’t easy, but his trap had been beautifully executed. “I did say that I’m

not a cop."

He finally left the household.

After another successful act, Shen Liufei quickly gave Tao Longyue a call. His expression was stern as he reported succinctly, "I got the answer. Arrange for excavators and bulldozers at St. Noe's outdoor field immediately."

Still working overtime at the municipal bureau, Tao Longyue didn't expect Shen Liufei's little trick would work. "Whoever keeps company with the wolves will learn to howl. Looks like you've been tainted by that shit now, huh, Mr. Shen?"

"Yeah." The idea may not have come directly from Xie Lanshan's mouth, but it was definitely inspired by the man's history of using manipulative methods to solve cases. Shen Liufei couldn't help but admit it—sometimes, only evil could fight evil. Xie Lanshan's devious approach certainly had logic behind it despite how outlandish and unconventional his techniques were.

Beside Captain Tao stood Chi Jin and Ling Yun. Thanks to these two elites from the provincial forces who'd confiscated the drugs and locked down the Starex Group in time, the act had been a success. The two had even cooperated in the ruse, giving anyone who asked about the case a grave and withering look. Eventually, word of mouth fomented their behavior, successfully making everyone believe in the elaborate lie. Their wordless responses not only aligned with public security procedure but also provided enough doubt to fool even Peng Hongbin.

Tao Longyue shot the two provincial agents behind him a glance, only to be at the receiving end of another annoyed and frustrated look from Chi Jin. Captain Tao quickly cleared the pride from his eyes and gave the other man an innocent and righteous look, then turned to chat with Shen Liufei. "But only you can do something like this. The rest of us civil servants couldn't have afforded to attempt something so unconventional."

Shen Liufei was not in the mood for chitchat. "Prepare the helicopters for rescue as soon as we find Yao Yao's corpse."

Tao Longyue was also very concerned about Xie Lanshan's safety, but he couldn't change the weather. "The forecast said tomorrow will be another typhoon day. I don't think it'll be that easy to send a rescue team."

Beside him, someone suddenly coughed.

Tao Longyue turned his head with his phone still in hand. Ling Yun pressed a finger on his lips, a playful, haughty smile on his face. As soon as he noticed Tao Longyue's gaze, he cleared his throat again. The famous Blue Fox Commandos were virtually a living legend in the eyes of the public, like a squad of superheroes who could slay dragons and crush monsters. The miracles they could supposedly do weren't completely baseless. Ling Yun smiled brightly like a freshly bloomed flower; a young, energetic air danced at

his curled lips. “So, Captain Tao, I’m actually pretty good with helicopters.”

“You know how to fly a helicopter?” Having just witnessed Chi Jin’s handsome diving technique, Tao Longyue was surprised to find this baby-faced young man also had a unique skill.

“Not only that, my skills are as sharp and breezy as my name—” He gave a thumbs-up. “Ling Yun, the one who rides the clouds!”

The sports field in the All-Girls Middle School was turned upside down. The machines continued to rumble until dawn as the team searched for the corpse.

The heavy wind blew across the field, hissing like a venomous snake. The sun peeked from beneath the horizon, shining a bloody red on the green field. From Shen Liufei to Tao Longyue and Chi Jin to Ling Yun, no one at the scene felt any relief upon settling the cold case. Rather, their faces were grave, their hearts ached and mourned, and chills ran down their spines. The murderer was left to roam free, the perpetrator of the violence remained unharmed, and the avengers had given their lives for one last attempt at revenge, all while the bystanders watched coldly from the side...

Several meters down, they finally excavated a female corpse inside a black plastic bag. Her flesh had already decomposed, returned to the earth by worms, leaving only a white skeleton.

Shen Liufei turned to see Mei Shumin standing above the sports field’s spectating area. Her eyes fixed on the excavator until the girl’s bones returned to the surface. Her expression seemed complicated.

The sun finally broke past the horizon and shone on the earth, cleansing the old sins and shadows of time left on the land.

(ii)

After letting the girls return to the main cabin, Xie Lanshan stayed in the storage room. Xiao Gu’s corpse still lay on the ice-cold floor. He stood on a box and narrowed his eyes to study the beam Xiao Gu had hung from, but nothing suspicious appeared. The culprit likely hadn’t used tools to kill her, but instead stood high like this to choke Xiao Gu, then arranged the scene to make it look like a suicide.

He thought this kidnapping case originated from a set of despairing parents seeking justice for their daughter, but Xiao Gu’s death reopened the spiral of mystery. While he would never give up on a case until he reached the finish line, this was the first time he’d felt clueless. Xiao Gu’s tongue, neck, and nails proved she had struggled violently right before her death. How could these teenage girls hang an adult woman by force?

Xie Lanshan attempted to recall the period directly after the typhoon, but the chaos of the storm had erased the details. Aside from remembering Peng Yixuan had clung tightly to him the whole time, he couldn't recall what Xiao Gu had said or done to the other girls.

What had he missed? Closing his eyes, Xie Lanshan traced back his memories from the moment he stepped on the ship. The introduction of the girls, the dinner together, the games... everything ran through his mind like a movie playing in a dark theater—

Pen Yixuan saying, "I'm kidding. There's no way. All right, I guess it's my loss this round."

Yu Yangzi saying, "Hey, these containers look nice. What are they for?"

Zuo Ruoqi saying, "It's not a random container. It's called a Go-kei; it holds stones for Go."

Yu Xin saying, "I remember now—didn't your dad also sponsor the city's middle school Go tournament once?"

Aside from Yu Xin, all the girls claimed they weren't familiar with Go.

Something was off.

His headache returned. The man pressed the bridge of his nose, replaying the scene in his head, attempting to recall that strange factor.

Before he could reach an answer, another commotion came from outside. Zuo Ruoqi called out, "The ship's on fire!"

Initially, Xie Lanshan feared there really was a bomb on the ship. Seven days had passed—it was bound to go off. Rushing out of the storage room, he faced a cloud of heavy smog. Xie Lanshan called to the frightened girls running around like headless chickens, hoping to ease their fears and organize them to put out the fire. He searched for tools to aid them as he rushed to the tail of the ship.

The engine room was down there. If it blew up, it could easily trigger a much bigger chain reaction.

Just before the fire occurred, Peng Yixuan sat by herself on her large bed in the master cabin. Someone among the girls' group was planning on harming her to take revenge, someone was pushing her aside, and someone else hated her enough to kill her. That meant staying alone was much safer than staying with friends who'd betray her in the blink of an eye. Xiao Gu's sudden death removed her from the equation, which meant one of the girls left alive on this ship was the true mastermind.

But even after isolating herself, she hadn't let her guard down. Peng Yixuan clutched her knife, her eyes glowing with rage, her face grave like a demon's. This confined space of murder and lies had become a terrifying hunting ground where even the closest of friends turned against each other. Danger

loomed at every corner.

As she held her weapon in hand, murder blossomed in her heart.

This pretty girl dancing between the fine line between devil and angel prepared to slice through the throat of the girl coming for her.

It wasn't the first time she had committed murder.

That day after Qiu Fei left, Peng Yixuan returned home. Her cowardly brother never shied away from hitting on girls but lowered his head when real trouble came about.

After learning their daughter killed a person, Peng Hongbin sighed in disappointment while Cheng Ya painfully wept. Both parents pitied their daughter, feeling it was unjust for such a young girl to be involved in such a mess. They had completely forgotten about the other young girl on her last breath in the trunk of the car.

The foolish and uncaring Peng Cheng said, "That girl's still alive. We can send her to the hospital. Li'l Xuan here is only thirteen. Even if the girl dies, she won't need to be punished under the law..."

Sobbing, Cheng Ya slapped her son's face. "Do you not care about your sister's reputation?!"

Arriving at the underground parking garage, Peng Hongbin ordered Chang Ming to open the trunk; he instantly recognized the victim. Once, while intoxicated at an afterparty of a Go competition, he had secretly touched her when no one was around.

Suddenly, the girl opened her eyes and reached out a shaking hand. Her gaze wide as she stared at the man as if calling for help, beseeching him.

Still in tears, Cheng Ya forced her husband to make a decision for the sake of their daughter's future.

Her death wouldn't have been a problem. Keeping her alive was more worrisome. Peng Hongbin worried Yao Yao would expose his embarrassing little fetish if she survived. Calling Chang Ming over, he quietly ordered the man to find a place to bury the young girl. "That open field by the school is good. We can donate a sports arena and nobody will ever find out."

Recalling the event almost made Peng Yixuan laugh. Her brother, Peng Cheng, always called her an egotistical monster molded by lies and sculpted by malice whose whole body had rotted until the black blood tainted even her bones. But he had forgotten the people who raised this little monster also were monsters themselves.

Peng Yixuan had first met Yao Yao in her school at a middle-school-level Go competition her father sponsored. Peng Hongbin had always avidly supported all sorts of young adult competitions. At first, Peng Yixuan was quite baffled by why her father was interested until she accidentally ran into her father's hotel room to see him as he reached his hand under a young girl's

skirt. As his face twisted in a disgusting expression foreign to her, he pressed his lips by the girl's ear to sing her tender temptations.

Feeling a siren go off in her head, the strange girl had dashed out of the room.

As the two passed by, Peng Yixuan glanced at the girl; her nose was flat, her chin still held on to some baby fat, and she could not be considered pretty.

Staring dumbly at her father, the sensitive and mature young girl waited for her father's explanation, but he didn't speak. The next day, Peng Yixuan received a pretty doll from her father, airmailed overnight and worth thousands of US dollars.

Just as he had done many times before, he believed any unpleasantness could be eased by money and cracks could be filled by presents. As for his wife and his mother, the two women were engaged in frivolous social activities, as usual. Countless receptions and daily parties filled their schedules, making them even busier than when they were still actresses.

Peng Yixuan was left alone in this large mansion of over five hundred square meters. She had once killed a cat and splashed a maid's face with hot soup. Now she ripped the doll's head off and removed its limbs.

The next time she met Yao Yao was at school, when the girl's father came to pick her up. Peng Yixuan didn't even know the girl's name, but she knew one thing for certain: she hated her, the same way she hated that dumb cookie-cutter doll, that cat that had refused to listen to her, and that clumsy maid. Normally, the girl looked timid and quiet, and too average to be picked out in a crowd, but her relaxed and nonchalant expression with Peng Yixuan's father was blinding and infuriating.

Just as Peng Yixuan dwelled in her own thoughts, someone outside pounded on her door. "Yixuan! Yixuan!"

Peng Yixuan clenched the knife tighter in hand. "Who is it?"

"It's me, Zuo Ruoqi." Zuo Ruoqi indeed stood outside. She had the least connection to the murder, so she was therefore the most harmless of the girls.

Peng Yixuan relaxed, though she didn't let Zuo Ruoqi in. "What happened? What's with the commotion?"

Zuo Ruoqi called frantically, "The engine room in the back of the ship caught on fire—the ship's sinking! Come out! It'll be too late if you don't!"

"It's on fire! The ship's on fire!" This voice could have been Yu Xin or Yu Yangzi's—the cousins sounded very similar.

After a moment's suspicion, Peng Yixuan decided the fire was real and opened the door.

Xie Lanshan had already used up one fire extinguisher, but fortunately, the fire wasn't as big as he thought, and the remaining extinguisher took care of it.

Once he made sure it was nearly contained, he heard someone cry for help from the direction of the master cabin.

It was Zuo Ruoqi. Her pleas for help echoed through the hallway. Xie Lanshan tossed the fire extinguisher and darted toward the direction of the cry.

Zuo Ruoqi had been stabbed in the stomach and back; she kept a hand on her stomach as she ran. Fresh blood seeped between her fingers and dribbled a trail behind her. “Help me,” she cried as her legs weakened and she struggled to keep standing. Xie Lanshan appeared before her eyes like a ray of light at the end of a dark tunnel, guiding her back to the mortal world.

“Officer Xie, help... save me...” Zuo Ruoqi’s eyes beamed with hope as if she had just seen a hero. She rushed toward him.

Peng Yixuan chased after her with a bloody knife, but stopped as soon as she saw Xie Lanshan. Her expression nonchalant, she even attempted to point at the injured girl. “She started attacking me like a madwoman! I only fought back because she wanted to kill me. This is actual self-defense.”

Using up all of her energy, Zuo Ruoqi finally dropped to the ground. Xie Lanshan darted forward and caught the girl. Opening her eyes, Zuo Ruoqi moved her trembling lips. “I only wanted to pull her out to escape, but she suddenly grabbed her knife and stabbed me, and even chased me down...”

The other girls also arrived, staring in horror at Peng Yixuan. Giving everyone a smile, Peng Yixuan tossed the bloody knife away, quickly switching back to her innocent and harmless self. She felt no sense of remorse even now; the Peng family had enough money to handle a few small misdemeanor trials. “Sure, just say I was chasing after her with a knife, but I was only playing with her and accidentally stabbed her. Besides, I’m just a minor. The law won’t get—”

“No, this isn’t just a game. This is an attempted homicide,” Xie Lanshan interrupted her coldly. “Perhaps you’ve already forgotten, but this trip was to celebrate your birthday. You’re eighteen now.”

(iii)

Though Xie Lanshan had provided the exact coordinates of the ship, the awful weather and raging tides made it impossible for other rescue ships to sail close enough. The job could only be left to helicopters.

The rescue team’s captain pridefully declined Ling Yun’s offer at first; he didn’t think his team was inferior to the famous Blue Foxes.

Ling Yun wasn’t as conceited as Chi Jin, who would rely on his badge to push others down. The humble and warm young man only smiled as he rubbed the back of his head. Afraid the captain may have mistaken his intention, Ling Yun quickly explained, “Don’t worry. This has nothing to do with piloting

skills. The cop on the ship is a teammate of mine."

The aerial captain didn't quite understand. "This case is all over the news right now. Even I heard the cop on the ship is a normal officer, not part of the Blue Foxes."

"He once was, so he will forever be one of us." When Xie Lanshan was undercover in the Golden Triangle, Chi Jin hadn't yet graduated from the police academy, and Ling Yun was two years younger than Chi Jin, so he'd never even met Xie Lanshan. Regardless, his eyes glistened with confidence. "Our captain told us that no matter how long we serve the Blue Foxes, we will forever be a part of the unit. He's working hard to protect these young lives, so I want to fight alongside him!"

Brave but meticulous, Ling Yun reminded the aerial team captain to contact the target ship first. One girl with diabetes was suffering from ketoacidosis and needed immediate medical attention; the others had also been stuck on the ship for over six days and could possibly be severely injured. Ling Yun requested medical supplies such as respirators, high-pressure oxygen tanks, and insulin IVs for the helicopters. He also contacted medical personnel to be prepared to receive the victims at the front lines. Hospitals behind the scenes needed to be ready to provide first aid.

At the highest speed, the wind scaled up to a level-twelve hurricane with the tallest wave at thirty-four meters, complete with brief downpours. Most small medical helicopters weren't able to fly under this heavy wind, so two larger helicopters took off. The closer they approached the target area on sea, the more severe the turbulence became. The heavy rain clouds blocked their view.

"The wind's too strong—the aircraft is heavily tilted. The aerial captain is managing to maintain the balance of the aircraft; paging Ling Yun on the other helicopter. Is everything all right over there?"

The situation was certainly not all right, but Ling Yun piloted calmly and whispered encouragement to himself beneath his breath: "For the Horde!"

On the seventh day of the kidnapping, waves danced along with the winds while the engulfing seawater devoured anything caught in the storm. After surviving a typhoon and arson, the *Starglow* was in shambles and ready to sink at any moment.

Rescue still hadn't arrived; the girls were frustrated and anxious, two had fallen unconscious, and the foul scent on the ship grew heavier, stirring up their fear of death.

After cleaning up Zuo Ruoqi's injuries, Xie Lanshan sat against the wall, closing his eyes to rest. His back was drenched; he couldn't tell whether it was his own sweat, the rain, or seawater.

The moment the sound of the helicopters arrived, the pessimistic air on the ship vanished. The girls rushed toward the deck, waved the yellow smoke signals, cried at the sky, and shed tears of joy.

Passing through layers of heavy rain clouds, Ling Yun looked down. The ruined cruise ship was on the verge of breaking down.

The winds still shrieked on the ocean; violent tides created a thumping rhythm to accompany the dangerous rescue mission. The helicopters lowered two stretchers for the unconscious Lu Weiwei and Zuo Ruoqi first. After those slowly rolled up to the sky, the medics immediately began first aid. The rest of the girls slowly boarded, leaving Peng Yixuan and Xie Lanshan as the last two on the ship. Peng Yixuan's hands were already cuffed, so Xie Lanshan wrapped the rescue rope around her waist.

Right before they lifted her up, Peng Yixuan's expression turned into an innocent pout; her big eyes blinked like a helpless little creature. "Even wild animals don't usually prey on their own species. How could you do this to me?"

Amused, Xie Lanshan lifted his eyes and stared right back at the girl. "You think we're the same?"

Peng Yixuan whispered into Xie Lanshan's ear, "Like minds can easily find one another. We don't even need to use our eyes to tell the difference. Wolves and nocturnal predators can sniff each other out just by smell." The girl inhaled and continued mysteriously, "That's why I can smell the violence on you; we're both cruel, bloodthirsty, and evil."

Xie Lanshan laughed. "Hey, Little Miss, you're a grown adult. You need to stop saying such embarrassing things."

He tightened the rope around Peng Yixuan's waist, lifted his arm, and gestured toward the helicopter.

Xie Lanshan rode in Ling Yun's helicopter. Ling Yun took off his helmet, exposing his handsome face, then turned to give Xie Lanshan a smile and saluted the man, "Comrade, I'm Ling Yun from the Blue Foxes, friend. The captain ordered me to take you back home."

Comrade, Blue Foxes, captain, home... each word seemed to be enchanted, giving depth and meaning to every phrase. Xie Lanshan's restless heart finally received a moment of tranquility and peace. He didn't say a word, simply returning a salute. Quelled by the sound of the helicopter engine, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

The helicopter flew out to the sea with the wind, then returned against the storm as it broke through the clouds and flew home.

At the helipad on top of the hospital, Xie Lanshan, disheveled from the dangers on the ship, reunited with Shen Liufei.

Xie Lanshan didn't expect to see Shen Liufei as soon as he stepped back on ground after floating on the sea for several days. Unlike the medical personnel anxiously checking up on him and the girls, the man simply leaned by the staircase with his hands in pockets, distant and cold as usual.

Xie Lanshan was covered in injuries from head to toe. Several cuts from glass shards marked his face; his broken thumb had swollen up like a giant radish despite his hasty attempt at bandaging it. The typhoon was still critical; the winds were even harsher on the rooftop of the hospital, whipping at his shabby clothing.

Shen Liufei lifted his eyes to Xie Lanshan, then walked over without removing his gaze. The cold and calm gaze shifted within a split second, exposing something passionate and hidden beneath that quickly set aflame like a field on fire.

After seven days of separation straddling the line between life and death, the two men stood face-to-face. The memories they had shared burst like a broken pearl necklace, rolling across the ground.

Xie Lanshan stared back at Shen Liufei, wanting to smile but unable to lift his lips, wanting to cry but refusing to show such a weak side. In the end, he returned to talking about the case. "Sorry, Mr. Shen, I did my best. The girls are all alive, but two people still died."

The result was a blessing in disguise, almost a happy ending. Of course, this story would make the headlines and earn Xie Lanshan further merit. To his surprise, Shen Liufei didn't accept his humility and simply nodded. "A drug dealer and criminal suspect. Even though we could argue you could have done better, this is still an acceptable outcome."

These words were cold and harsh, disregarding Xie Lanshan's efforts. As he recalled the last time Shen Liufei had questioned and criticized his methods, rage ignited within the man. He stared at Shen Liufei like the artist was nothing but an evil creature who knew only how to spit venom and harm others.

Under his stony gaze, Xie Lanshan exploded. He pointed at his injuries. "I almost fucking died on that ship! Next time we get another case like this, it's an open call to whoever the hell wants to sign up for the job. A whole ship of crazy girls is much scarier than a damn ship full of mad—"

Holding Xie Lanshan's face in his hands, Shen Liufei interrupted the words with his lips, deepening into a kiss.

The apron of the roof was usually empty, but at this critical time, medics were still around. However, neither of the two had time to care about bystanders.

Their tongues turned and intertwined in the deep kiss. After a brief moment of shock, Xie Lanshan closed his eyes in satisfaction to enjoy this warmth.

Following his survival of a life-and-death trial, the tired and suffering soul inside him finally settled back to the place he belonged.

Everything was right again.

Suddenly, he recalled something, pressed his eyebrows together, clenched his teeth, and bit Shen Liufei's lips.

Shen Liufei let go of Xie Lanshan. The artist's usual iceberg expression seemed on the verge of breaking down in favor of annoyance. "Stay focused."

"Hey, man, I just remembered something." Xie Lanshan frowned and asked, seeming serious, "Is the term 'Go-kei' considered jargon? Do you think anyone who isn't familiar with Go would say that word out of nowhere?"

Shen Liufei had a fondness for traditional Chinese culture. Based on *The Brink of Light and Dark*, he clearly also had knowledge of abstract strategy board games on top of calligraphic art and music.

"Go-kei is a Japanese term for the container. Likewise, Go-ban and Go-ishi aren't too niche, but a person who knows nothing about the game wouldn't know these words." The kiss had certainly excavated a new kind of emotion within him; Shen Liufei's breathing was heavy and hasty, and his tone was irritated. "Are you sure you want to discuss this with me right now?"

"Depends on what you say." Noticing the burning desire beneath that gaze, Xie Lanshan felt quite pleased. He leaned forward seductively and gently bit Shen Liufei's lips, asking softly, "You said 'I' right before the phone line cut off last time, so what did you want to tell me?"

Shen Liufei's breathing settled. He opened his mouth, keeping a straight face. "I want you."

Feeling sparks within him, Xie Lanshan walked away, a stern look on his face. He quickly turned back after taking a few steps. "A promise is a promise." He walked off to the staircase, then glanced back once more and gave another rare, sheepish laugh. "I'm demanding immediate execution!"

Tao Longyue wanted to contact Xie Lanshan to ask about the case—only to find the man had already left, leaving a simple message on WeChat:

Death to anyone who disturbs me tonight.

Xie Lanshan woke from a short nap to see the rain outside. It was dark, black like a curtain covering the sky; only a small glow from a distant skyscraper illuminated the surroundings.

Shen Liufei was already awake. He sat on the sofa facing the window, fully clothed, with a hand on his forehead.

Xie Lanshan couldn't see Shen Liufei's eyes due to the backlight. Half-awake, he attempted to pull himself up. His lower body was still aching and burning, drenched in the lingering warmth from the climactic phase earlier.

The question of who topped or bottomed was not of concern to Xie Lanshan. It wasn't easy to find someone to truly love after decades of loneliness, but he quickly realized that his body instinctively resisted when he got intimate with another man. Shen Liufei noticed as well; even though Xie Lanshan had shown attempts to cooperate, it was still hard to pin down the fatigued body that had survived seven days at sea. He had to ease the man with gentle kisses as he entered Xie Lanshan, hoping to relax the tense body in a brawl-like bedroom experience.

"What are you looking at?" Xie Lanshan immediately noticed his hoarse voice as soon as he opened his mouth; excitement seemed to have taken his voice away.

"You," Shen Liufei responded in his usual calm voice, cold like chilled alcohol, as if the burning thirst in bed from earlier had not originated from him.

"You've been staring at me for a while?"

"I don't remember, it's like time just stopped," Shen Liufei responded. "I could keep watching you until dawn."

Xie Lanshan laughed out of his aching throat and lifted the sheet up, exposing his whole body. "I look that good?"

His long limbs and defined muscles were certainly fine. Between his legs was his flaccid member hiding behind dark hair; indeed, his body was objectively beautiful and his skin was delicate in a way that was difficult to find on men, and even rarer on a cop. Xie Lanshan continued joking shamelessly as usual until Shen Liufei leaned forward, following the dim light outside the window. He studied the man's body and said, "You do look fine."

Xie Lanshan laughed and gestured for Shen Liufei to lean in closer, "Then what are you waiting for?"

Shen Liufei stood up and walked toward the bed. It was only a few steps away, but Xie Lanshan squinted as he watched his lover walk closer. As the distance closed between them, the figure became clearer and Xie Lanshan felt a strange urge to immortalize this scene and treasure it for the rest of his life.

Shen Liufei stopped beside the side and leaned down to press his lips against Xie Lanshan's. The kiss was deep and passionate; their breaths mingled as he drew out Xie Lanshan's tongue, forcing the latter to lift his chin up to respond to this aggressive call.

By the end of this long kiss, Xie Lanshan finally saw Shen Liufei's eyes up close. The latter was looking down, eyebrows slightly furrowed. It was difficult to make out what was in those eyes. Drops of anguish seemed to be mixed in with the usual coldness and calmness.

Xie Lanshan also pressed his eyebrows together. He touched Shen Liufei's face gently, his thumb traced the artist's arched eyebrows before stopping on

his eyelids. “You seem a bit upset...”

“Do I?” Shen Liufei turned his head and pulled Xie Lanshan’s hand down. He stuck out his tongue and gently licked the other man’s fingers.

“C’mon, I’m a cop. I can’t do my job if I don’t at least have some observation skills.” Xie Lanshan was quite enjoying this little foreplay and felt his lower body heating up, begging for some attention. He quickly grabbed Shen Liufei’s hand and pulled it toward his crotch.

In a swift gesture, Shen Liufei pinned the man back down on the bed as Xie Lanshan shifted slightly to allow for an embrace. Shen Liufei nibbled on the back of Xie Lanshan’s ear as he skillfully fondled the other man’s crotch.

“Something to do with your mother?” Xie Lanshan felt a gentle caress against his foreskin and let out an instinctive sigh of pleasure. Fatigue had certainly caught up with him, and the earlier round had only managed to get him half hard, but he was quite pleased with even these little gestures and continued, “I haven’t heard you mention her since the last time you brought it up at the antique market.”

“I’ll tell you later.” Teasing someone else only fired him up more. Shen Liufei used his free hand to pull down his pants, releasing his erect cock.

“Why not today?”

“Because it’s not a good story. Tonight’s special, I don’t want to sour the mood,” Shen Liufei said nonchalantly as he slid his hand toward Xie Lanshan’s crotch and gave it a good rub before moving toward the posterior.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not usually this sentimental, it’s just that...” Any story about a mother’s murder would not be a good one. Xie Lanshan froze up slightly as he felt a finger slide up his buttocks and decided to not question it further. He whispered as he closed his eyes, “It’s just that... it’s too tiring.”

Six years of undercover work was like a fleeting dream. Countless times he’d been tempted to give up; the only things that kept him going were that unyielding spirit he inherited from his old man and Sui Hong’s words of peace.

He really, truly, was tired.

“I’m so tired that sometimes I even feel like I’m not myself—that I’m not... Xie Lanshan...” As his voice dwindled, Xie Lanshan buried himself in Shen Liufei’s embrace, but he couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“You have a slight fever, might be a good idea to drop by the hospital tomorrow for a checkup.” Shen Liufei didn’t respond to the previous comment and merely pressed a hand on Xie Lanshan’s forehead. He then brushed the man’s sweat-drenched bangs up his head, revealing a clean forehead as he tied the long hair to the back.

“I—” Xie Lanshan wanted to speak, only to be interrupted by another kiss.

Shen Liufei pulled in the sheets and blankets to push up Xie Lanshan's rear as they continued the kiss. Their second time built from the experience of the first; Shen Liufei lifted Xie Lanshan's leg and once again went inside from behind.

(iv)

The physical revealed that, aside from a thumb fracture, Xie Lanshan had multiple soft-tissue injuries and a high fever. Mild injuries never affected Xie Lanshan, but Tao Jun insisted the young man rest at home out of worry the same passion and rashness as in the past would claim his fallen comrade's only son.

Xie Lanshan might have been granted a vacation, but he was still a busy bee from dawn to dusk, and even as he stayed at Shen Liufei's house, he didn't forget about his work, requesting copies of all confessions from the girls on the ship. He fell into deep thought upon reading the report.

During the closing act of the thrilling seven days, the *Starglow* shook violently under the raging typhoon and waves as if there was an earthquake on water. The arson further created a scene of chaos. Right before the rescue helicopters flew off, Yu Yangzi's missing DV camera had suddenly reappeared. Xie Lanshan had discreetly taken out its SD card before leaving.

He had already seen the video stored inside.

Shen Liufei saw Xie Lanshan twirling the SD card, then shifted his attention to the witness account report. "Zuo Ruoqi? Is there something more to this case?"

Xie Lanshan scratched his head, frowning. "Not anything in particular. There are some things I still don't quite understand."

Seeing the other intended to keep secrets about the case, Shen Liufei opened up first, sharing his thoughts. "I've seen the files on Yao Yao's disappearance. The cops suspected she left home because of her internet date and investigated Fan Xipin's IP address, which only led to a public internet café."

Xie Lanshan nodded. "I know."

"There's something else you don't know. That internet café is near a school. Zuo Ruoqi's middle school."

Xie Lanshan understood the unspoken words behind this line and turned to Shen Liufei.

Shen Liufei faced Xie Lanshan, lifted the latter's chin, and inspected the injuries on his face. "After the media exposed Yao Shuxin's threatening letter, the families of the victims all rallied at the bureau. Most of them refused to listen to what the police had to say, like typical parents. Only one girl's parents

never showed up from start to finish."

Xie Lanshan shifted his gaze back onto the report before him. The answer was clear: Zuo Ruoqi came from a divorced family. After each parent remarried, they had new kids and families to take care of. Though Zuo Ruoqi theoretically was under her mother's care, her situation was more accurately described as purposeful negligence.

A finger gently brushed the injuries on Xie Lanshan's face again—clean scabs that wouldn't leave any scars. "A similar family background and a similar sense of solitude and unhappiness. If Zuo Ruoqi had known Yao Yao in the past, I'm sure they would become very close friends."

Xie Lanshan's expression changed slightly, quickly analyzing the issue. He looked at Shen Liufei sternly. "But you didn't write all of this in the files."

"It couldn't be counted as evidence." Shen Liufei placed a gentle kiss on Xie Lanshan's forehead. "Your injuries are healing up nicely."

As if he had an epiphany, Xie Lanshan shoved the SD card into his pocket and stood up abruptly. "I need to visit the hospital."

The dawn of autumn had ushered in falling leaves and the chilly breeze. The weather had cooled, and night fell sooner in the day. "It's past visitation hours."

"That's exactly why I must go now." Xie Lanshan walked into Shen Liufei's study and picked out a copy of *The Brink of Light and Dark* from the shelf. "I'm borrowing this book of yours."

Just as he was about to leave the house, someone behind him called out, "Xie Lanshan."

Frowning, Shen Liufei looked right into his eyes. "As unfortunate and tragic as Yao Yao's story was, I still believe in one saying—only a perfect human has the right to throw a rock at a sinner, and nobody is perfect." After another moment of silence, he spoke up once again in his deep and cold voice. "I've once discussed this with you before. Rather than saying good is a display of the rawest form of humanity, it's more accurate to say it's a contract used to restrain our beastly instincts. Any evil deed done in the name of justice still breaks this contract. It will always bring about the loss of order."

Xie Lanshan quietly digested these words. Smiling, he placed a kiss on Shen Liufei's cheek, then walked out.

It was past public visitation hours, so every floor had a designated reception nurse on duty. Noticing a cleaning cart at the corner of the staircase, Xie Lanshan quickly dressed in the blue scrubs hanging from it.

Now indistinguishable from any nurse, he walked right into Zuo Ruoqi's room.

Zuo Ruoqi was still pale on the bed. Her body was weak, but she had escaped critical condition and was recovering well. Recognizing Xie Lanshan, she immediately sat up and joked, seeing the man dressed strangely with the wrong name tag on his scrubs, “Hi, Mr... Wan Xionggang?”

He hadn’t checked the name tag when he took the clothes. Still, he responded without hesitation, “I live with a big heart and hone my skills every day. My dad says it’s a good name, but it does sound kind of rough.”

“You know you didn’t have to dress like this even if it’s past visiting hours.” Zuo Ruoqi already noticed it was a little façade, laughing. “You can just show your badge and say that you’re a cop here to get a witness account.”

“You know I’m not here for the case.” Laying his hands out, Xie Lanshan displayed the nurse scrubs, returning a warm and kind smile back to Zuo Ruoqi. “I’m just here to visit my bravest little girl.”

This smile successfully disarmed her defenses and pulled the two closer. Zuo Ruoqi felt warm inside and thankful fate had acquainted her with this man. If a man like him was by her side at all times, perhaps she would be foolish enough to give him the rest of her life. She knew she was looking at someone she couldn’t even reach; they were never meant to live in the same world, but she couldn’t help but give him a few more glances. He was like the sun; a weak and small plant would always turn toward him for growth.

“It’s nothing really, just what I could do. Lu Weiwei’s mom already came to visit, twice even, and was here with gifts. She thanked me for taking care of her sick daughter. If it wasn’t for me, perhaps Weiwei wouldn’t have survived.” The young girl seemed rather embarrassed by the praise. Lu Weiwei’s mother certainly showed her appreciation through action. Baskets of fruits and health supplements filled the hospital room. Lilies decorated the flower vase; the fresh dew on the petals glowed an elegant silver under the moonlight. “Of course, they follow the rules like good people, unlike a certain cop here who always shows up with the worst timing.”

Xie Lanshan sat beside Zuo Ruoqi. “Does your injury still hurt?”

During the surgery, the doctors had cut off a portion of her intestine and even taken out a kidney, but Zuo Ruoqi was quite brave and still joked with him. “It does hurt sometimes, but other times, it’s itchy. I can withstand the pain, but not the itchiness. Now I only have one kidney left, though, so I can’t sell it in the future if I go broke.”

Glancing around, Xie Lanshan asked, “Is nobody around to stay with you overnight? Where are your parents?”

Zuo Ruoqi’s expression dimmed, but she forced a smile. “They’re quite busy, but it doesn’t even matter if they stay.”

Xie Lanshan took off his scrubs, then handed his book to Zuo Ruoqi. “I brought you something to read when you’re bored.”

The book was called *The Brink of Light and Dark*, and clearly related to Go. A painting called *Toukon* depicted a famous Go game in Japan during the early twentieth century. The painting depicted both the contestants and the game board, and while the game was still in its early phase, the match was clearly at a stalemate. The captions also provided context. The young girl was quickly consumed by the content.

Xie Lanshan suddenly lowered his head; even his long eyelashes couldn't cover the light in his glowing eyes. For a moment, he looked almost embarrassed. "You know, he was the one who drew this book."

"He? Who's he?" Uncertain if it was her natural instincts or a certain kind of radar, Zuo Ruoqi checked Xie Lanshan's reaction. "Wait, you mean your you-know-who?"

Xie Lanshan shrugged slightly as a form of wordless admission, then smiled. "He's an artist. The text portion was included by the editor."

Zuo Ruoqi flipped another page. "He really is something. Is he good-looking too?"

Xie Lanshan gave an affirming nod.

Zuo Ruoqi's little heart tingled; her eyes widened and glistened. "Really handsome? Better-looking than you?"

"Hm... let me try recalling how I felt when I first met him..." His fingers danced at the edges of the bed as if playing the piano. Xie Lanshan dug through his memories in an attempt to find the most appropriate description "Oh, I got it—so imagine you're in chaos, in the dark, and then you see him. He was like a ray of light that split the sky and land apart."

"Are you kidding me? There can't be anyone that pretty!" Xie Lanshan was already quite handsome himself, so who could possibly be worth his praise—a god? Zuo Ruoqi gasped; all of the little gossip cells in her body boiled up. "So... did you guys finally do it after you got back home?"

Xie Lanshan choked on air, cleared his throat, and didn't respond.

Zuo Ruoqi continued pestering him, each question obscener than the last until she was laughing so hard she had to press on her wound. "Look at you—you're blushing now."

"All right, all right, can we put a stop to this conversation and talk about the paintings instead?" Seeming truly flustered, Xie Lanshan held his forehead in his hand, desperately trying to change the topic. "He told me the inspiration for *Toukon* came from a famous battle between Sakata Eio and Fujisawa Hideyoshi. Fujisawa preferred close-range fights, while Sakata was more used to setting up traps across a wider range—"

"No, no, you mixed it up." Distracted by the laughter from earlier, Zuo Ruoqi naturally corrected him. "In terms of style, Sakata Eio was known for close-range combat, while Fujisawa was—"

The words stopped abruptly. Zuo Ruoqi's blood froze, chills spreading through every inch of her body. Shivering instinctively, she looked into Xie Lanshan's eyes.

At this moment, she finally understood the meaning behind his gaze.

From the moment this man entered her hospital room, showing his playful side and distracting her with the conversation, every step had been calculated for this one critical blow—to lower her guard and lead her into the trap.

After some silence, Xie Lanshan let out a small sigh. "Anyone who knew nothing about Go could easily find out what a Go-kei is, but they would never know so much about two Japanese Go masters—am I right, Fan Xipin?"

Zuo Ruoqi was different from all past criminal suspects. She didn't have Li Rui's heartlessness, nor was she as calculating or meticulous as Tang Zhaozhong. After being exposed, she didn't even attempt to find excuses. She admitted she'd pretended to be a boy and chatted with Yao Yao; the two quickly became good friends. She simply wanted to find a friend to cure her loneliness but didn't expect to see cops at that internet café the day she was supposed to meet Yao Yao. She was just a child back then afraid of being involved in a complicated case, so she chose silence, yet soon after the event, Yao Yao had vanished.

Then, one day, the restless Yao Shuxin finally found her. A single tear from the old and sickly father unraveled the slight regret inside her, convincing her of Yao Yao's fate. Unfortunately, Yao Shuxin already had a foot in the coffin and had no choice but to find his ex-wife Zhang Suyun for help—the woman later known as Xiao Gu.

Zuo Ruoqi's face grew pale, her lips trembling. "So you've suspected me since we were at the dinner table?"

"No, I just happened to realize early on that this entire plot relied too heavily on coincidences and good timing. If nobody among the girls was guiding and working with Xiao Gu, she could never have accomplished everything by herself." They fell into the same pile of unanswerable questions. Xie Lanshan lowered his eyebrows. "But there's one thing I never understood. If you were Xiao Gu's accomplice, why did you kill her? And how did a girl like you manage to hang Xiao Gu and disguise it as a suicide?"

"We really did fool your eyes." Zuo Ruoqi's voice was soft and there was a faint smile on her face, but she had no pride in winning the game. "Of course you couldn't solve this death because Mrs. Xiao really committed suicide."

Xie Lanshan's eyes widened. "But there were scratch marks on her neck; her injured tongue also proved that she struggled right before death—"

Suddenly, the answer appeared before Xie Lanshan. He wanted to say something but realized he was choked up, upset, moved, and shocked all at the same time.

This was a trap. The bait was the life a mother was willing to give for her daughter. Xiao Gu had purposefully ripped her clothing, scratched her own neck, and created the illusion of her murder to disguise her suicide and distract Xie Lanshan.

Before Xie Lanshan could ask, Zuo Ruoqi answered. She shook her head with a bitter smile; her eyes narrowed to a gentle crescent, filling with tears of grief. “We didn’t have time to punish the true culprit. Once Yu Yangzi discovered that antibiotic, we both knew you would soon reach the truth. We had to take a gamble by causing further chaos and creating more obstacles, hoping they could hold you back a little longer so Peng Yixuan would finally pay for her sins.”

Xie Lanshan’s expression grew stern. “The typhoon brought enough chaos. Even the heavens were on your side.”

“Still, that day when Peng Yixuan said she would never be punished by the law, Mrs. Xiao got really upset. Mrs. Xiao thought death wouldn’t scare someone like Peng Yixuan since she doesn’t respect human life. The pain and fear at the moment wouldn’t be enough repayment for all of her crimes. So Mrs. Xiao wanted to punish her with the help of our legal system. Once she turned eighteen, she would suffer the full weight of the system. She would be stripped of her privileged and luxurious life and spend ten years as a criminal who would only have her own tears to soothe herself behind bars. If that could truly make her repent, that would be the icing on the cake.”

“One more thing.” Xie Lanshan’s eyebrows didn’t relax. “You knew I was a cop, so why did you invite me on board? Also, you could have easily let Lu Weiwei die of ketoacidosis. Why did you stay up all night to care for her?”

Zuo Ruoqi lowered her head. Her fingers twirled by the bedsheets, but she didn’t reply.

The answer was clear. Xie Lanshan lifted the corner of his lips. “Looks like you aren’t an experienced criminal yet, or I should say—you’re not an evil person.”

“Mrs. Xiao... Yao Yao’s mom isn’t evil either. She just wanted to know the truth behind the case for the sake of her daughter. She had too many chances to kill everyone if she wanted to...”

Xie Lanshan nodded. “That’s why she wanted to remove you from this case. She didn’t ask you to kill Peng Yixuan during the chaos. Instead, she asked you to provoke the girl while she was alarmed. One gentle touch and bam—Peng Yixuan stabbed you.”

“Mrs. Xiao wished to end the case with her suicide. She also asked me to visit Yao Yao’s grave every year. She wanted me to live her unfinished dream...” Zuo Ruoqi’s voice cracked as she choked on tears. “What should I do now? Turn myself in?”

The girl didn't realize the cop didn't have any concrete evidence at hand, and his witness account was not enough to convict her. She didn't want to see Peng Yixuan's attempted homicide conviction overturned and Xiao Gu's sacrifice made pointless.

Of course, Xie Lanshan was on the same page.

"Before I came today, someone told me any evil deeds done in the name of justice break the contract of humanity—supposedly that can only lead to chaos." He looked into the girl's helpless and grieving eyes for five long minutes. At last, the corner of his lips lifted again in jest. "But I respectfully disagree."

Zuo Ruoqi prepared herself for a moral lecture, only to receive a vastly different line.

"Regardless of whether a heart is good or evil, both are creations of our consciousness. Knowing the difference between good and evil gives us morals and allows us to do good, while the power of knowledge exorcises evil. A pedophilic bastard can escape lawful punishment due to wealth and authority, an asshole who beat his wife can dig through the loopholes of the law to escape penalty, a sick and twisted murderer could fake a mental illness diagnosis to dodge the death sentence, and those little devils who aren't even fourteen can commit a crime with no restraint in broad daylight... there is no order in this world. How could we lose what we never had?"

Xie Lanshan pulled out the SD card and tossed it to Zuo Ruoqi. With a mysterious and catty smile, he told her, "I happened to find Yu Yangzi's camera. There were some... truths caught in the footage. I think you would be willing to keep this in your hands. Besides, there's no proof to convict you, so rest up while you can."

He got ready to leave.

Shocked by the man's reaction, Zuo Ruoqi called to him, "Are you... really a cop?"

Their eyes met. Within the man's gaze, she could see an ever-changing and shifting emotion. That clear, saintly, and sympathetic expression deepened into a dark void. Suddenly, this man wasn't Officer Xie on the ship who broke his own thumb to save everyone on board but someone completely different.

Just before stepping out, Xie Lanshan lifted a finger and placed it against his lips. Silence fell over the room.

Panic on the Road

Both Lu Weiwei and Zuo Ruoqi had escaped the critical condition thanks to the first aid they received, and both were staying in the hospital for recovery. Although Xiao Gu's corpse still came under scrutiny, no other evidence could prove that she was murdered. The prosecutor's office stepped in while the case was still in the hands of the investigators. It was clear Xiao Gu killed Chang Ming, and Peng Yixuan's case was likely going to be settled as intention to commit homicide. The girls and officer Xie Lanshan had all witnessed Peng Yixuan chasing Zuo Ruoqi with a knife in hand while still on the ship; they could all prove as witnesses that the young girl was intentionally breaking the law and had once threatened to murder all of her fellow schoolmates on the ship.

The mass kidnapping case was now in the headlines across the country. With Yao Yao's corpse finally discovered, the truth behind her years' old mysterious disappearance came to light. The drug-trade case was associated with the Starex Group, and despite not having direct evidence to convict Peng Cheng of involvement, it was still a massive blow to the family's reputation. The professionals from the prosecutor's office all agreed that Peng Yixuan was not yet fourteen years of age when she killed Yao Yao, thus per the law, they could not use the case in court as a prior criminal record, but the minor protection law could not be used as a breeding bed for underage criminals. As Peng Yixuan's evil nature remained unchanged even upon adulthood, a judge could still assess her act of killing Yao Yao and disposing of the young girl's corpse as a misdemeanor case in court.

This decision not only fit within the confines of the law but was also a satisfactory verdict the public wanted to see, earning commendation from people all over the country.

Hanhai City certainly broke the municipal bureau's record of the number of illegal substances they confiscated during the case. However, Chang Ming's death halted further investigations on this front and summoned Sui Hong personally to Hanhai City. The special forces captain prepared himself to assist the city's homicide and violent crimes unit, in addition to customs security, aiming to dig deeper into the source of the drugs.

Captain Sui was an easy-going and friendly man. Despite carrying a superintendent third class badge, he lived in the most modest public bureau housing. Upon his arrival at the bureau, he summoned his two subordinates to hear a detailed case report.

In front of their captain, the two stood straight and upright as if their backs were steel boards. Chi Jin was quite proud, and Ling Yun was quite excited. The Blue Foxes had played a pivotal role in both cases and proven their worth to the city.

Sui Hong turned to look at Ling Yun, then coughed a few times with his hands over his mouth. However, he directed his words at his other subordinate, whose gaze he didn't meet, "I heard you were quite the hero here in Hanhai City but had a rough time getting along with the inspectors in the homicide unit?"

Chi Jin's face heated when he wasn't awarded his expected praise. The young man was a fierce and independent wolf before anyone—except Sui Hong, whom he admired as the captain's loyal subordinate. He turned his face and gave Ling Yun a leery look.

"I—I didn't tattle on you." Ling Yun felt his goosebumps rise with Chi Jin's stare and waved his hands in denial, then gave a wimpy remark, "Captain asked so I could only tell him the truth..."

"I just don't like how laid-back and unorganized they are," Chi Jin said with a hard expression, his words mingled with a hint of displeasure and frustration.

"I know why you have beef with the people in Hanhai. It's because of Xie Lanshan, right?" Sui Hong stood up and walked toward Chi Jin, his expression stern, and said, "You still think that Xie Lanshan let Mu Kun escape, don't you?"

Chi Jin clenched his teeth, his cheeks popping up slightly. He didn't say another word. Ling Yun pressed his lips tight, also afraid to speak.

Sui Hong let out a gentle sigh and gave a pat to Chi Jin's shoulder. "But I can tell you with confidence that it's impossible. Are you telling me that you can't even trust my words?"

Chi Jin panicked at the question and quickly explained, "That's not it, Captain... I... I'm just not convinced."

Sui Hong gave another cough and asked, "Not convinced about what?"

Chi Jin's refusal to give any kind words to Xie Lanshan was on strong display; he said with an icy voice and expression, "Why was Xie Lanshan chosen to go undercover for the Golden Triangle operation when I could have done it? In terms of combat and physical requirements, I'm clearly no less than him!"

Sui Hong was taken aback for a moment before he raised a hand and knocked on Chi Jin's head. The young officer reached a hand behind his head, staring at his boss in shock and confusion—he even pouted. The older man scolded him while laughing. "Now you're being ridiculous! You'd hardly just enrolled in the police academy and hadn't learned a thing when a-Lan was sent off on his mission. How could we send you out like that?"

Chi Jin pondered for a moment and realized that was indeed the case. He then noticed Sui Hong coughing a few more times, and quickly pulled out a small bottle of Nin Jiom Cough Syrup from his pocket, then handed it to his boss. "Captain, please take care of yourself. The weather's getting cold."

Before Sui Hong could take the small bottle, Ling Yun grabbed it from his comrade's hand and said, "Oh, hey, my throat's also been itchy lately, let me have some—wow! The bottle's all warm too, so much effort for one little thing."

"Give it back. Go pour your own cup of water if your throat's itchy!" Chi Jin glared sharply at Ling Yun, but the latter ignored the threat and continued fiddling with the bottle. Chi Jin grew even more upset and reached out a hand to take it back.

"All right, that's enough." After separating the fighting monkeys, Sui Hong laughed as he coughed, "You two did well on this case. Even though we've temporarily lost connections to track down the mastermind, I'm sure they will make a move soon now that we've confiscated so much red ice. As long as we keep our eyes on it, I'm sure we'll eventually be able to catch them. Anyway, let's forget about the cases for now. How about we decide how we're going to celebrate tonight?"

Ling Yun responded immediately, "Dinner's on you, Cap'n! Let's go to karaoke after dinner and sing all night!"

Sui Hong nodded. "Dinner's on me. What do you guys want to eat?"

Ling Yun once again chimed in, "No more Japanese food. I'm not too big on it. I like pork and roasted ham; I found a good place that can make some, Cap'n, so you're coming with me tonight."

Ling Yun continued on about wanting to have some team-building activities while the three walked toward the reception area of the bureau. As soon as Sui Hong opened the door outside, he was met with a surprising guest—Song Qilian.

Song Qilian also noticed the man but didn't walk toward him. She stood still behind the twilight and simply watched him in silence.

Sui Hong walked toward her and offered an invitation, "I'm treating my teammates tonight to dinner. If you're free tonight, you're more than welcome to join us, Qilian."

Song Qilian didn't respond. She stood dumbly as she stared at Sui Hong, still and silent like a tree. A while later, her eyes finally turned slightly and showed that she was indeed still alive. She said, "I'd like to speak to you about a-Lan."

Sui Hong noticed her reddened eyes, the grief and determination in her gaze, and responded grimly after a moment of silence, "Sure, follow me."

Chi Jin noticed the change in his captain's expression at the name a-Lan; this strange reaction also gripped his heart. He stood frozen even after Sui Hong's and Song Qilian's figures disappeared into the central park.

"What are you doing?" Ling Yun tugged on his teammate and said, "Cap'n is talking to his girlfriend, no eavesdropping."

"Nonsense! She's just a female friend, not his girlfriend," Chi Jin turned and corrected him irritably.

"Are you a porcupine? Do you just stab anyone you see around you? I was just joking." Ling Yun intended on teasing his teammate and reached to tug on Chi Jin's ears, then dragged the man away.

Chi Jin's expression darkened; he had a split second's urge to follow his boss in the moment but couldn't bring himself to stoop to eavesdropping. So the two young men in their early twenties left after a brief fight.

It was a typical fall evening after an autumn rain, and the aftermath of the typhoon had prepared the earth for winter. The park was still empty at this hour, but it was close to the time when elderly women would come out to dance in the plaza.

Sui Hong stood face-to-face with Song Qilian at the corner of the park. Trees and flowers surrounded the area, and it was rather quiet—in other words, an ideal place to have a conversation.

Sui Hong had already guessed the reason for the woman's visit, so he wasn't surprised when Song Qilian produced the DNA test results between Gao Zhuyin and Xie Lanshan.

"What can this possibly prove?" Sui Hong returned the report to Song Qilian and said, "Perhaps they've never been blood related in the first place—"

The voice of a woman on the verge of a breakdown interrupted his words.

"Then how do you explain the birthmark? And what about his drastically changing personality? He stayed by the side of the most dangerous drug lord in the world for six years. How was he able to return without a single injury?"

Sui Hong closed his eyes as he listened to Song Qilian's tearful questioning and accusations. He knew since the beginning that he would never be able to hide the truth from this woman.

"My grandfather has knife scars all over his arm. I once asked him about it; he told me it was inevitable to brawl with drug dealers during undercover missions and sometimes he had to even cut himself with a knife to avoid being forced to use drugs. He said that virtually all frontline undercover agents had to go through this horrific situation, but why didn't Xie Lanshan have to suffer through this?" Song Qilian took out the wooden sculpture she kept hidden inside her bag and held it up with a shaking hand before Sui Hong. She cried in despair under this tranquil autumn sky and said, "Please, I'm begging you, please stop lying to me. This is the person I've been in love with since I was twelve. I couldn't possibly mistake him for someone else... something must have happened to him during his undercover days... right...?"

Sui Hong clenched his fists without a word.

"You must know the truth," she said. Judging from the man's reaction, the woman knew she was closing in and risked it all with a harsh threat. "If you don't tell me, then I'll take all of this evidence to your director!"

Song Qilian turned and was ready to leave, only to be grabbed by the waist from behind.

"Qilian, don't do this! You'll ruin him!"

This was the first time Song Qilian had seen this man lose his cool. She'd met with him a handful of times before Xie Lanshan went undercover; Captain Sui of the

municipality's main narcotics special forces was always a man of elegance and fortitude who never lost his cool, even in the face of a shattering world. Yet the same man right now had his eyebrows pressed together. His eyes were red and his lips trembled. Even his fists were shaking as he said, "Xie Lanshan... comrade Xie Lanshan..."

Since names were casually used among officers in the bureau, nicknames were also common. Older officers would often be referred to with more seniority, while younger ones were treated like juniors. Closer colleagues would even have their own nicknames among each other. Typically, the phrase "comrade" was used ironically and almost never during casual occasions. Song Qilian could feel a hard blow to her chest as she heard Sui Hong say that word: her heart skipped a beat in fear.

As she had expected, Sui Hong allowed a warm, seldom-seen tear to roll down his face as he said, "Comrade Xie Lanshan gave his life in the line of duty..."

The words "gave his life" poured down like a thunderstorm, striking Song Qilian's refuge and washing away her soul.

It was a month before the multinational antidrug operation and for Xie Lanshan to accomplish his final mission. He noticed something off on the streets and was lured into a dark alleyway by gangsters attempting to violate a young girl—only to walk right into a trap.

Sui Hong said, "It was already too late by the time we found him. His face... was deformed by the beating..."

Song Qilian was right; how could a frontline undercover agent return from a mission without even a scratch on his body?

Xie Lanshan was lying completely naked on the autopsy table. His face had suffered nearly fifty harsh blows by a heavy metal rod, to the point his eye sockets and chin had horrifyingly caved in. The unsettling deformity had erased all of his former handsome glory. Despite his bloody and deformed face, and the many injuries to the rest of his body, he'd fallen unconscious. Perhaps he hadn't been able to get a good night's sleep like this in many years. Even the doctor, who had witnessed countless life-and-death moments, quietly shed a tear of pity at the awful scene...

"Then where is... a-Lan's body?" Song Qilian's eyes were already welling with tears when she asked, and she covered her mouth to stop herself from crying out too loudly.

"Because Mu Kun still hasn't been captured, we needed to keep the identity of Xie Lanshan alive. We couldn't bring his corpse back to China or announce his death. I buried him beside a Buddhist temple in a rural village in Myanmar with no gravestone..."

Song Qilian tried to imagine the scene of Xie Lanshan's sacrifice but discovered tragically that she couldn't even draw out an image of the man's face as an adult after uncovering the truth. The only thing that consumed her mind was the Xie Lanshan

from a decade ago. He was a kindhearted and strong young man who had smiled at her during those halcyon days like a pure and saintly statue on the throne of a deity. Xie Lanshan had always been like that; despite being a man of few words who smiled little, every rare instance of his smile was like the gentle sunlight during a cold winter day.

Song Qilian suddenly realized something and asked in panic through her tears, “Then who’s this Xie Lanshan right now?”

Sui Hong let out a small sigh. “The US military was involved in secret research. It involves combining a precise RNA injection with a craniotomy to transfer memories between animals; of course, because of the many ethical issues, the research ground to a halt. The research was still young, with very little information about potential side effects. Nobody even knew if it would succeed for humans, but the multinational operation to hunt down Mu Kun couldn’t afford to fail at the last minute—coincidentally, we discovered a criminal in prison at the time who looked almost exactly like Xie Lanshan. It was almost as if the stars had aligned for the experiment to succeed...”

“Prison...” Song Qilian almost couldn’t believe her ears as the shocking truth was revealed. “What kind of criminal?”

“He was...” Sui Hong struggled to explain, his expression twisted in pain and regret. After some hesitation, he finally confessed, “A criminal on death row. To be more precise, he was a serial killer with countless lives staining his hands...”

Song Qilian interrupted Sui Hong’s explanation with the most despairing cry, which continued until it turned into a pained laugh. After shifting between crying and laughing, she yelped in the same painful and despairing manner, “Didn’t you always call him the subordinate you’re most proud of?! He trusted you and admired you, how could you do something like this?!”

“This was my decision. The higher-ups aren’t aware of this! But I know that if Xie Lanshan knew, he would also agree to this decision. He is a fighter, a warrior; this is his duty!” Sui Hong paused for another coughing fit before continuing in his trembling voice, tears rolling down his cheeks, “Besides, I couldn’t possibly sit by and watch my comrade and subordinate sacrifice his life in a foreign land. I needed to do something for him, I really want... I really wanted for him to live, even if it was a one-in-a-million chance, even if it was in this unethical and incomprehensible form... I still wanted a-Lan to live on...”

“I’m going to tell your director, I’m going to tell him everything word for word—” Song Qilian was on the verge of a breakdown. She turned and got ready to run.

But Sui Hong once again stopped her.

“Qilian!” Sui Hong pulled on Song Qilian’s arm and growled hoarsely, “Think about it, there is no amnesty law for death sentences in our country, so if anyone were to expose this a-Lan... no, the Xie Lanshan right now would immediately be put on his deathbed...”

Song Qilian couldn't stand it anymore and slowly dropped to her knees while still clinging onto Sui Hong's arms. She had mentally prepared herself for all sorts of scenarios after receiving the DNA report, imagining every possibility, yet she could never have imagined the horrific and bloody truth. She regretted everything. Why couldn't she have pretended nothing was wrong? Why did she instead choose to search for answers?

"But have you ever thought... that if one day, he discovers the truth..." Song Qilian was kneeling on the ground, her blood and flesh all washed out in the form of tears. She was now nothing but an empty shell on the ground, exhausted. Suddenly, she realized that her current despair and shock was nothing compared to the amount of trauma Xie Lanshan would face when he discovered the truth. She lifted her head and stared at Sui Hong, then questioned him in a hoarse, painful voice, "How would you ask Buddha to accept that he had become a demon without knowing..."

(ii)

Sui Hong asked Song Qilian to keep the secret for him, but she refused. She threatened to expose the truth and forced Sui Hong to give her all the information about the criminal that he had.

He had no choice but to concede and handed her a heavy file while still attempting to convince her that the Xie Lanshan right now was no different from the man of the past. He was still a courageous and immovable soul, like a mountain. His good nature and character still bloomed inside him.

Song Qilian didn't listen to another word the man said and left in tears.

The files revealed to Song Qilian that the man who had Xie Lanshan's memories was a man named Ye Shen. He had formerly been a manager at a French investment bank; the man in the photo had long hair tied up in a unique manner, dressed finely, and wore an elegant smile on his face—but this same man also had the blood of at least five people on his hands.

A family of six had died tragically in a serene rural village. Police had discovered a type of poison called paraquat in the wells, but that wasn't the cause of the family's death. A culprit had brutally murdered the family with a knife while they were suffering from the poisoning. The photos of the crime scene were horrific; the youngest victim was a boy only eight years of age. What kind of demon would murder an eight-year-old without batting an eye? Song Qilian shivered.

The corpse of the wife, Shen Bing, was never found; however, the entire tub was filled with her blood. Her torn human skin was also found at the scene of the crime, so she was naturally presumed dead many years after her disappearance.

This case should've been closed at that time. However, a distant cousin of the man of the house, Zheng Chenglong, who was living with the family during the days of the murder also mysteriously disappeared after the massacre.

Zheng Chenglong had a criminal record that included a three-year sentence for rape at one point. Though according to the man himself, he had messed with more than one woman, but no one had the courage to report the incidents to the police. Based on the evidence gathered from the murder weapon, footprints, and condition of the house, it was possible that Zheng Chenglong had his eyes on his cousin's wife. His plan may have included drugging the victims first and then chopping them using an axe, then tossing Shen Bing's corpse after he murdered the rest of the family and raped her.

Zheng Chenglong became a wanted criminal and the prime suspect of the police's search.

Perhaps an omnipresent force had already planned out the fate of man, for a surprise discovery was made in the mountains by the village many years later. Rural areas during the time were still underdeveloped areas, and the corpse of a man was found while construction was underway deep in the mountains.

The corpse had been identified as Zheng Chenglong through DNA matching. According to the report, the man had been dead for over a decade. There was a deep gash left by an axe on his corpse, but the fatal blow was determined to be another mark—a heavy object had hit him on the skull.

At this point, the police finally realized that Zheng Chenglong was merely a misdirection left by the true culprit of the case.

This was a case over ten years old; Ye Shen had only been fourteen. Song Qilian covered her mouth and let her tears fall. This was a natural-born murderer.

Even more shocking was that many years later, Ye Shen was arrested for attempting to rape and murder another girl by the name of Zhuo Tian using the same method. The girl had once called the cops for help. This was how the police caught Ye Shen red-handed—as he was about to brutally murder the young woman. Ye Shen didn't deny any of the crimes he was accused of, but aside from a floor covered in blood and a butterfly-shaped piece of human skin, the police could not find the girl anywhere in his residence.

Recalling the facts now, Song Qilian only began to connect the dots. Xie Lanshan and Ye Shen had audibly different voices and vastly different personalities—everyone had only assumed that this change was due to his time in isolation for six years while undercover. Another detail to note was that Xie Lanshan didn't have dimples, but Ye Shen did. More importantly, Xie Lanshan was not interested in men—Ye Shen, however, was openly gay.

The young Liu Chang stood nervously behind her, his eyes wide in shock, unable to comprehend his mother's grief.

The doorbell rang before she could finish going through the files. Song Qilian was still inundated by pain and sorrow, so Liu Chang rushed to open the door in place of his mother.

Outside the door stood Xie Lanshan. He had promised the mother-and-son duo that he would continue teaching the little boy how to swim, yet he hadn't seen Liu Chang show up after waiting close to an hour at their designated meeting place. Xie Lanshan attempted to contact Song Qilian; he called and messaged her but never received a response. He knew they would never miss any appointments and was worried, so he paid the house a visit.

Xie Lanshan didn't get any response after ringing the doorbell multiple times. Just as he was about to leave believing no one was at home, the door suddenly opened. Liu Chang only opened the heavy wooden door behind the metal security gate; the young boy stared at the man behind the openings of the gate slats.

The safety of the two was of utmost importance, so Xie Lanshan's racing heart relaxed and he knelt to face the boy's gaze, asking gently, "We promised to meet. How come you didn't show up?"

Liu Chang mumbled, "Momma won't let me go. She said I'm not allowed to go near you in the future..."

This shocked Xie Lanshan. "Why is that?"

Liu Chang also found it baffling. Even at his young age, he could tell that his own mother had clear romantic feelings for this Uncle Xie, and the boy also quite liked the man himself. Deep in thought for a moment, the little boy made a slight gesture before reaching his hand up to the door handle, ready to open it for the man.

"Changchang!" His mother's cry stopped him. Liu Chang jumped in shock and sheepishly pulled his hand back. He gave Xie Lanshan outside the door an apologetic look, confusion written all over his face.

Xie Lanshan saw Song Qilian appear behind the boy. The woman stood frozen with no intention of opening the door for him.

It was the tail end of fall reaching into winter; the weather was chilling to the flesh. Xie Lanshan had already been standing for an hour out in the chilly wind while waiting and his limbs were numbing as time passed. Hoping to enter the house for a cup of hot tea, he raised a hand and knocked on the door again. He turned to the woman inside with a playful grin on his face, laughing, "Trick or treat."

But Song Qilian still didn't open the door. She couldn't—she refused to understand the results of the human brain transplant procedure. Regardless of whether he had the flesh, the identity, or the soul of a-Lan, she could no longer tell the difference. She found in horror at that moment that she could no longer tell who he was.

That was when Xie Lanshan noticed the tearstains on Song Qilian's face. His first instinct was that Liu Mingfang had once again come to harass the single mother and child, so he asked out of concern, "Qilian, why are you crying? Is it that bastard Liu Mingfang again?"

Realizing she could no longer find traces of her former lover on this man's face, Song Qilian pulled her son into her embrace and cried out, "Please don't come to see my son anymore, I'm begging you, please don't come to me anymore..."

In front of her face full of hatred and fear, Xie Lanshan stood frozen and watched as Song Qilian avoided him like a monster.

"Just what exactly happened..." This hurtful and distant reaction from his former lover painfully stabbed Xie Lanshan's heart, and his expression showed how he felt as he mumbled, "I don't understand..."

Even though they had only known each other for a brief period of time, Liu Chang didn't hide his fondness for his Uncle Xie and struggled within his mother's grip.

"Sorry... I'm really sorry..." Song Qilian apologized through her tears. She had already made a decision: to protect her son from the monster, she would write a letter to the provincial bureau's director, Sui Hong's direct boss, and expose the bloody truth of "Xie Lanshan's" identity.

And Xie Lanshan himself was completely oblivious to this destructive decision.

"There's nothing to apologize for. I'm just glad to see that you and Changchang are okay. I'll take my leave then." Even after being pushed out of the door, he didn't feel he needed an apology. His heart might have hurt, but he only wished for her to be happy.

He bent down and left a snow-white lily by the woman's front door. Out of courtesy for paying an unprompted visit, he had brought a flower with him—he always remembered that white lilies were her favorite.

After considering the woman's reaction might have stemmed from something that she couldn't talk about so easily, Xie Lanshan turned back after taking a few steps away from the door. He gave Song Qilian a familiar and warm smile, then said, "I just want you to remember that no matter what happens, I am always ready to give my life for your sake."

(iii)

Even though Song Qilian's sudden change in attitude was hurtful, the most important job right now was to investigate Zhuo Tian, the girl who appeared in his dreams.

Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei had grown closer over the last few months, and the former was able to rip open the file bag that Xiao Qian had delivered last time with Shen Liufei in the same room.

The files suggested that this Zhuo Tian girl had a criminal record. She'd been imprisoned for drug use and had been sent off to rehab centers. From the recorded witness accounts, she'd quit school at a young age and ended up getting involved with gangs, later becoming a druggie.

With the help of Shen Liufei, the two completed some further investigations based on these reports. Surprised to find out that the process went smoothly, they successfully were able to get in contact with Zhuo Tian's father.

Zhuo the old father lived thousands of kilometers away, so they could only contact him by phone. He spoke with a heavy accent and explained that his daughter had stepped into the world of drugs through shady friends, which eventually led her down the path of selling and living off illegal substances. She refused to listen to her parents, who tried to stop her. The last they heard from their daughter, the young girl had claimed she was going to stop doing drugs after she completed a big business deal in Thailand with her boyfriend.

Shen Liufei, who was the first to contact Zhuo Tian's father, said, "Remember the last case; that third-year high school girl by the name of Qiu Fei was also dealing drugs in secret. Isn't the primary focus of your job now to figure out how to deal with the ever-changing forms of narcotics and illegal substances? Wouldn't you naturally end up handling someone from the new generation of drug dealers?"

Xie Lanshan saw some truth in this statement. Piecing it together with what they now knew about the young girl, it wouldn't be surprising for a female drug dealer from the Golden Triangle to die in his hands as she had in those dreams.

Shen Liufei added calmly, "If you don't believe me, perhaps we should consider paying Zhuo Tian's father a visit to speak to him in person."

Xie Lanshan turned and stared at Shen Liufei. There were still many truths to be uncovered about this girl dressed in white that haunted his dreams, but Shen Liufei returned his gaze openly, like an exposed net waiting to capture anything that came up. Those earnest eyes convinced Xie Lanshan.

After a while, Xie Lanshan expelled a deep sigh. He walked up and buried his face in Shen Liufei's shoulder, repeating quietly beneath his breath, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Thank you for letting me know that I'm not a monster." This nightmare involving Zhuo Tian had made him doubt himself and his identity perpetually; among those doubts were some suspicions that he felt were too nonsensical to even speak of. The weight on his shoulders finally lifted after a belated peace of mind; Xie Lanshan sank into Shen Liufei's embrace and almost wanted to laugh at his own silly thoughts.

"Of course you're not a monster." Shen Liufei let the man go but kept his warm, affectionate gaze on him. The artist's lips lifted into a faint smile, and he placed a gentle kiss on Xie Lanshan's forehead. "You're a good cop, you're Xie Lanshan."

Shen Liufei lived modestly and naturally wouldn't put too much effort into decorating the interior of a rental house. Autumn was a season of solitude, especially during the hours of dusk. The room seemed emptier and more lifeless than usual as Xie Lanshan glanced outside the window; the skyscrapers stood tall like trees in a forest, the neon lights glistened against the dark background. People's voices echoed from afar, but a unique sense of quietness engulfed the streets that made the city seem like a different world for a brief moment.

"Now that you've found your answer, I have another suggestion for you. I think it's time for you to admit that this is part of the PTSD symptoms you've developed from

your undercover mission, and it's time for you to completely forget about all of those traumatic memories that still haunt you. We've uncovered the truth behind Yao Yao's case, but the red-ice case is still a mystery. We don't have that much spare time for you to patch up your wounds, so you should focus on doing your job as a cop." Shen Liufei turned and walked into the kitchen. He bent down to open up the fridge and then asked Xie Lanshan, "What do you want for dinner? I'll cook."

Years of living under harsh conditions as a law enforcement officer had trained Xie Lanshan to survive on cold food and rations. He could count the number of times he'd had a warm meal in a year on one hand, so he could hardly believe that one day he would have a pretty lover cooking for him. It was a memorable taste of a lifetime that reminded him of a New Year's Eve where his old man was off duty. Freshly cooked New Year's dishes filled the table, the aroma of home wafted in the air. He finally pushed down those unsolved mysteries in his memories temporarily and allowed them to collect some dust. His gaze fell on Shen Liufei's back and down to that slim waistline, then he said, "I have a suggestion too."

Shen Liufei stood up and turned in confusion. "What is it?"

Xie Lanshan lifted an eyebrow playfully. "Your house is too cold and big. Why don't you just stay with me since this is a rented place anyway?"

Shen Liufei's expression remained unfazed. "Are you inviting me to live with you?"

The fact was that Xie Lanshan had already been staying over at Shen Liufei's place for a couple of days with the excuse of recovering from his injuries, but the cop felt that it was quite inconvenient. First of all, the place was too far from the municipal bureau, and second, this wasn't his own home—it was quite embarrassing to live like an in-law freeloading off of the artist. Xie Lanshan gave Shen Liufei a sly smile; the glint in his eyes shone a suggestive color. "Your five sons back home miss you a lot. I can't possibly keep them at a foster home all the time either."

"Depends on how serious you are. I'll think about it." Shen Liufei lifted the corner of his lips as he closed the refrigerator door, his cold face finally warming up slightly.

"Absolutely serious." Xie Lanshan hooked a finger on the edge of his underwear and pulled it down a few centimeters. He then turned and said with a grin, "Try me, if you want."

Xie Lanshan was usually the deep sleeper between the two. Perhaps it was the long-term headaches that lowered the quality of his sleep over time, or perhaps it was the stress of working on the frontlines over these years, but he finally seemed to have found a place to rest peacefully. Shen Liufei got up at midnight and walked into the study on his own. He placed a file into the ashtray and burned it to dust.

He'd made a fake copy of Zhuo Tian's files. Of course, the girl's basic information could easily be found if Xie Lanshan had searched himself, but the most important piece of information about the girl was fake. He knew that Xie Lanshan would trust him and not conduct a second investigation.

The cooling autumn night was much chillier than usual. Those deep, dark eyes reflected the little sparks of flame and warmth in the ashtray. Shen Liufei stared at it for a moment until his cell phone rang.

The person on the other side of the Pacific Ocean asked, “What do you plan on doing? Expose this secret to his superiors or take care of it yourself?”

Shen Liufei didn’t answer immediately. He leaned on his chair and lifted his chin. His fingers tapped along to the jumping sparks of fire in the ashtray. He finally spoke up after the paper fully transformed into a pile of ashes.

“He’s a good cop. I plan on giving up now.”

(iv)

He wasn’t able to give Liu Chang the swimming lesson over the weekend, but that didn’t mean he could afford to miss a therapy session during the workday. Xie Lanshan arrived much earlier than his appointed time and sat before Song Qilian’s desk, questions and suspicion still building up within his mind.

There was a heavy and large express mail envelope on Song Qilian’s desk; he knew that was the report from his therapy sessions. Song Qilian told him that the report wasn’t for his boss in the municipal bureau; she was sending it directly to the provincial branch.

“The provincial branch?” Xie Lanshan felt his heart jump but still attempted to put on a playful smirk. “Don’t praise me too much, I’ll get embarrassed...”

Just as soon as he spoke up, he noticed something was off. Song Qilian’s eyes reddened, her face grew deathly pale; her expression seemed grave, and as though she was in mourning.

Xie Lanshan had his guesses on Song Qilian’s sudden change in attitude, but he assumed most of it was from Liu Mingfang. He went through all sorts of possible scenarios in his mind but could never have imagined that the package didn’t contain his psychological report—in fact, it was Ye Shen’s personal files and all the documents about the “brain transplant” surgery. The blade of the guillotine would drop as soon as these files were delivered to their destination.

“I’ll be sending out your report today, so you’re free to leave now.” Song Qilian avoided making eye contact with Xie Lanshan and tried hard to hide the pain in her gaze. She pressed the package beneath her palms and prepared to send it out like a bullet shot from a gun.

She then looked at Xie Lanshan’s face, her gaze filled with lingering affection, repulsion, and fear. She bid him goodbye, but she knew it was a forever farewell. “Goodbye, a-Lan.”

And then she kicked him out of the office. Xie Lanshan didn’t rush back home and instead pulled out an old cassette tape from his pocket, stopped as he stared at it, then turned around and walked upstairs.

Aside from the therapy centers in the city's hospital, there were two psychiatric offices that handled more severe cases of mentally ill patients. The offices and hospital rooms were located on the top levels of the building; regular and severely ill mental patients all lived in locked units behind heavy metal doors.

Xie Lanshan arrived in search of someone. He would walk around the hospital after his own therapy sessions sometimes, and last time he came, he had promised an old woman suffering from dissociative identity disorder that he would find a tape of Teresa Teng's songs for her.

Xie Lanshan knew these patients weren't all severely ill, but due to lack of professionals in the hospital, the management simply locked them all up for easier control. He had an epiphany one time as he saw the nurses walk in and out of the ward: *Why couldn't these patients listen to some music?*

The doctors sure couldn't understand this gesture. To them, letting these mentally ill patients run around in the open area was already a great gesture of benevolence from the hospital. There was no need to put in the extra effort in such trivial matters. But Xie Lanshan insisted on helping. He said that his own mother was also a patient at another psych ward, and could confirm music and dance could help improve both the emotional stability and cognitive abilities of these patients.

The doctors had no reason to argue with this police officer and could only agree to let him do as he pleased on this matter.

After finally finding a working cassette player, he placed the tape inside and pressed the start button. Soon, Teresa Teng's beautiful voice rang out in the room, *"Blooming flowers and beautiful scenes are all fleeting..."*

Xie Lanshan allowed the old lady to step on his feet as he led her to dance to the beautiful beat of this music. Her cheeks became a cherry red from her bright grin. The people around them laughed joyfully. Perhaps it was the lure of the Queen of Mandopop, or the scene of an old woman dancing with a handsome young man was too comical, or perhaps it was just senseless laughter—regardless, all the patients soon joined in the joy and grinned beautifully.

Song Qilian followed the sounds of laughter upstairs and immediately saw Xie Lanshan leading an old woman to dance out in the open area.

Xie Lanshan's smile was beaming and beautiful, his expression and posture elegant as the music consumed his mind. Even the old mentally ill woman seemed to have regained her youthful vitality for a fleeting moment; both of them danced gently to the shock of everyone around. A colleague eyed Xie Lanshan and walked beside Song Qilian, asking her, "That's your friend, right? Such a handsome lad!"

Song Qilian nodded slightly, still dazed.

The colleague seemed to have spoken to Xie Lanshan a few times and said, "This old lady asked for Teresa Teng's tape last time he came. I thought he was joking with her when he agreed to bring one back. It's hard to find old cassette tapes like this now, so I told him to just record something random on a blank cassette tape for her. But he

said no, he made a promise and had an obligation to keep it." The colleague seemed to be puzzled at why Xie Lanshan would put so much effort into a request from a mentally ill patient. "You know, she might not even recognize it if you find something similar. Why did he need to search for such a rare item just for a request like this?"

Song Qilian smiled. She listened to the music quietly and watched Xie Lanshan. Other patients began joining in to dance with him, laughing as they almost lost their balance.

Before the end of a song, a commotion from upstairs suddenly interrupted them. All the medical personnel rushed up and called out anxiously, "There's an emergency! Serious emergency!"

A patient had gone on a violent rampage, broken out of the nurses' barricade, and rushed up to the roof, ready to jump off the building.

Xie Lanshan ran up to the roof along with the doctors and nurses, asking about the condition of the patient on his way. The person in question was a forty-something-year-old male patient who was suffering from severe schizophrenia. He used to be an obsessive martial artist when he was younger, so he was not an easy target to restrain when he fought back in full force. His daughter had come to pay him a visit today but seemed to have accidentally triggered something during their conversation. The man acted up immediately and knocked out a handful of nurses on standby.

"They all want to poison me, the sovereign!" The man was already climbing onto a precariously wobbling metal pole jutting out from the rooftop.

"The sovereign?" Xie Lanshan asked a nurse beside him, "What kind of hallucination is he seeing?"

"He thinks he's Emperor Wu from the Han dynasty." The nurse shook their head, wanting to laugh but couldn't. "And he said that all the doctors here are his eunuchs, the nurses are his palace maids."

The man waved a hand and called out, "It is I, the true Son of Heaven, the Great Emperor Wu of Han! Answer me, subjects! Hast thou lured in the Huns and plotted to take the life of our imperial sovereign?!"

"Well, at least his history is pretty decent." The nurse who was used to dealing with delusional patients finally burst out in laughter; it certainly was a comical scene if they could ignore the dangerous environment. Xie Lanshan quickly analyzed the situation at hand. The building on this side of the hospital was still under construction, and the fire truck had already arrived down below. However, the lower level was still a dangerous field of broken metal poles and cracked concrete. Even if the man could survive a fall from this height, he would suffer severe injuries that not even air cushions could save him from.

Xie Lanshan attempted to take a step forward only to see the man back up frantically. The young cop gestured as if he was lifting an invisible long robe and dropped to one knee, a single phrase rolled out of his mouth, "This humble servant pays respect to His Imperial Majesty."

This shocked the doctors and nurses, but the man was very pleased by that line and momentarily settled down.

“By Your Majesty’s decree, your servant has initiated a counterattack against the Huns. Your army has now returned with an honorable victory in hand, offering twenty thousand enemy lives...” Xie Lanshan said as he carefully made his way forward, one step at a time, toward the middle-aged man. It takes a real maniac to follow the footsteps of a madman, but the young cop’s expression was stern, his mouth pressed into a sharp line as if he really believed he was playing a role—this was a life-or-death matter now, not a comedic skit.

While the madman was pleased and consumed with this poetic and overly formal nonsense, Xie Lanshan grabbed his arm and dragged him back to safety.

He leaned back and panted heavily, watching the daughter cry as she hugged her father, then leaned down to brush off the dust on his knee, and gave a soft smile.

Song Qilian also followed up to the roof and waited behind the others for the patient to be saved. As soon as the roaring claps rang out around her, she silently left the scene.

The old woman was still listening to the same song downstairs. Just as the song lyrics, *When will you return?* played, Song Qilian felt uncontrollable tears rolling down her cheeks.

That man would never return, but it also felt as if he had never left.

When she returned to her office, a colleague asked if she had any packages to deliver. The mailman had arrived.

Song Qilian shook her head. She quietly placed the package on her desk into a drawer.

(v)

Love is perhaps the hardest liquor, igniting a fire within one’s body as the alcohol seeps into the veins. If Xie Lanshan said they were moving in, they were moving in; he restlessly helped Shen Liufei prepare to move out over the weekend.

The young cop was busy and covered in sweat despite the cold weather. He rolled up his sleeves to do the heavy lifting but seemed to enjoy the job. Shen Liufei was on the other side casually feeding the goldfish in his tank—the fish being gifts from his female students again—while Xie Lanshan worked. It had been a while since the last day of the Crane Museum’s public art classes, but the girls had not given up on sending their instructor fan letters to this day. The gifts finally evolved from plants and flowers to living creatures.

The two round goldfish in the circular tank swam joyously. One fish was black with red patterns, while the other was a beautiful gold color. Both had little crowns on their heads—they were apparently rare among their species. Xie Lanshan asked, “Where did they get the idea of gifting you goldfish from?”

“Maybe it was because I copied Klimt’s *Goldfish* painting during the last lesson.” Beneath the twilight, Shen Liufei’s handsome profile shone as he lowered his head to feed the goldfish. “I can keep them in memory of the class.”

Like how Xu Beihong had once copied Rembrandt’s painting and Feng Zhen copied Matisse; Xie Lanshan had once seen this painting Shen Liufei reproduced. Three naked women covered the canvas. Their alluring bodies boldly covered most of the canvas space. According to Shen Liufei, the main focus of this painting was merely the naked female form and nothing else.

Xie Lanshan wasn’t too interested in art and instead shifted his attention to some old English books and vinyl records that were organized into a cardboard box. He asked for the owner’s permission to look at those, only to receive a sharp glance from Shen Liufei. “Those can be tossed away.”

“Your interests sure are strange.” Xie Lanshan dug through the box and picked out the heaviest art history book to flip through, then quickly lost interest and reached out for another. A photo dropped as he opened the book. In it was a beautiful woman holding a young boy of about eight or nine years in her arms.

Xie Lanshan’s first instinct was that this was Shen Liufei’s mother and so he held the photo up beside the man, trying to see the similarities between the two. He mumbled, “How come you look nothing like your mom—”

Shen Liufei swiftly took the photo away before he could finish and placed it in his shirt pocket without a second word.

Xie Lanshan rubbed his chin and studied Shen Liufei’s profile; the cold and blank face was still as difficult to read as usual, but he was a little upset—at the artist’s stern refusal, and at him keeping a distance.

Xie Lanshan suppressed the frustration in himself and said almost jokingly, “You said you were going to tell me about it eventually, but it’s been so long already. Still can’t tell me about her?”

Shen Liufei turned to Xie Lanshan and said in a calm voice, “She was a gentle and kind woman, almost to the point of being too passive. She was an obedient wife and a depressed mother.”

“And?”

Shen Liufei didn’t seem interested in continuing this conversation. His lips pressed together and he stared at Xie Lanshan with a slight frown, the silence between them continued until the doorbell rang to disrupt this awkward silence.

Xie Lanshan opened the door to see a young man standing outside with a basket of fresh fruit in hand. The man grinned widely at Xie Lanshan and said in a pleasant voice, “Hello, neighbor, can I ask for your help?”

The man wore black-frame glasses that pressed on his flat nose, but his eyes were beaming with life. On first impression, he seemed rather courteous with the way he dressed. The man handed Xie Lanshan the basket of fruit and introduced himself as Qiao Hui, a resident of unit 803 in the same residential building. He scratched his

head sheepishly and said he was planning to confess his feelings to his crush that night, so he thought of an idea to create a giant light display on the building at 8 P.M. to spell out “I love u” for her. The “love” in the middle would be stylized into an actual heart shape, but all residents in the building would need to take part by turning on or off their lights at the designated time—despite the cheesy method, it was certainly a thoughtful and romantic gesture.

Because of the location and high price of the units, there weren’t very many people living in this residential building, so it wasn’t too difficult to organize this sort of event. Qiao Hui had already received permission from the manager for his idea, who had agreed to help him control the lights of the empty units. However, Qiao Hui would need to knock on occupied individual units to request permission for help on his project.

Shen Liufei’s unit was the topmost unit of the letter “I” according to the layout plan. Qiao Hui said they only needed to roll open the curtains and light up their room for five minutes. That would be enough time for him to make his confession.

Xie Lanshan had the heart to support a good deed, and Shen Liufei didn’t seem to have any objections. The artist walked over and nodded courteously after receiving the basket of fruit.

“Thank you, thank you so much! You guys are the last unit. Everyone else was quite supportive too and have all agreed to help!” Qiao Hui beamed gleefully and bowed in appreciation. He pointed at a business card inside the fruit basket and said, “I’m the primary oral and maxillofacial surgeon at Puren Hospital. If you’re ill, please don’t hesitate to come find me anytime!” After realizing the words came out a little too morbid, he smiled and said, “Of course, better if you don’t need to come to visit.”

The young man cordially left after the visit; the door closed just as Qiao Hui’s figure disappeared. Xie Lanshan wanted to continue the conversation from earlier, yet he knew his boundaries and instead leaned on the sofa while taking an apple from the basket. He rubbed the fruit on his shirt before taking a crisp bite into it, then said with the juicy flavor of fresh apple in his mouth, “Huh, a doctor like him can’t be in his early twenties anymore. He’s surprisingly romantic for someone his age.”

It was a sharp turn in conversation, but Shen Liufei noticed Xie Lanshan had more to say after this. The artist turned and leaned down without a second word, gripping Xie Lanshan’s neck like he was reining in a horse.

The bitten apple rolled onto the ground. Xie Lanshan attempted to fight back. He lowered his head and bit hard on Shen Liufei’s arm. Shen Liufei frowned but didn’t loosen his grip and leaned in closer until he pushed the cop down. Muffled thunder rolled outside as the two bodies embraced and tugged each other until both men fell to the ground.

It was clear that Shen Liufei was trying to offer bodily pleasure to avoid answering more questions, and it was unfortunately a very effective method. Xie Lanshan was still a little displeased with the action, but the rain of burning and passionate kisses

quickly soothed the unease.

The doorbell once again rang at the wrong time. Xie Lanshan cursed out loud in the midst of their passion, then crawled up and mumbled while he answered the door begrudgingly, “Isn’t it just a damn confession?”

Yet Xie Lanshan’s eyes widened the moment he opened the door.

The tall man standing outside looked to be a few years older than Shen Liufei, but was still a very handsome man. To be more precise, Xie Lanshan could say that he’d never seen any man who looked as fine as this person in his life.

The visitor seemed to recognize him; his eyes glowed in a slightly incomprehensible light for a moment before an elegant smile appeared on his face. “Hello, Officer Xie.”

Xie Lanshan was surprised. “Do I know you?”

Shen Liufei stepped out from behind, his expression stunned.

The expression only flickered over the artist’s face for a split second, but Xie Lanshan caught every little change in his eyes. This sparked a whirl of emotions in him before his suspicion solidified.

“This is a friend of mine from the States, Duan Licheng; he used to be a neurosurgeon for the US military.” Shen Liufei didn’t introduce Xie Lanshan to the other man; his gaze fell onto the man outside the door. There was no hint of joy from reuniting with an old friend on his face as he said sternly, “I didn’t think you would come back so soon.”

Xie Lanshan wanted to invite Duan Licheng into the house, but instead Shen Liufei told *him* to leave. “The doctor and I have some things to discuss, so you should go back first.”

Xie Lanshan was still a little dumbfounded. “But it’s about to rain outside.”

Seeing Xie Lanshan stand dumbly, Shen Liufei handed an umbrella hanging by the door to him and added another line in consolation, “Wait for my message.”

This attitude was drawing a clear line between the two; Xie Lanshan realized that Shen Liufei had something to hide from him, but he wasn’t the type to get upset about it. Without taking the umbrella or even bothering to pick up his jacket that fell to the ground, he grabbed the tank of goldfish. Teasing slightly, he laughed and said to Shen Liufei, “Gonna bring back some food for our sons.”

Just as he was about to leave, he turned back to the still-stunned Shen Liufei.

“You know, they say that finding love and good sex isn’t hard in life; it’s more valuable to find someone who understands you. I used to think Liao Yimei had just written some cheesy romance line, but now I see some merit in it.” Xie Lanshan paused before leaving a last note with a stern look on his face. “I don’t believe my love for you is just the result of unruly hormones.”

Almost as soon as he stepped out of the building, the heavens deemed to prank him and poured a heavy torrent of rain over him. A young woman got out of a taxi and ran with her head down, trying to escape the downpour as soon as possible. She was

dressed in a lotus-pink coat with a long black dress underneath, complete with a diamond-shaped black purse around her shoulder. She didn't watch the road as she ran and slipped, falling right into Xie Lanshan's chest.

Xie Lanshan helped the woman up, but the woman's sharp nails scratched his arm and left a long cut deep enough for blood to well from the laceration. The fish tank Xie Lanshan was carrying also dropped to the ground; one fish fell into the sewers as the other struggled for a while on the wet ground before it stopped moving.

"Sorry, I'm so sorry..." The woman looked up and saw Xie Lanshan. Her eyes widened in surprise immediately. "Oh, it's you!"

The young woman looked to be in her early twenties and cleanly dressed with beautiful long black hair. Despite not knowing her name, Xie Lanshan recognized her. She lived in the same building as Shen Liufei and he would often run into her in the elevator, so the two were somewhat acquainted.

"Your fish... why don't you give me your contact information so I can buy a new one? Please?" The young woman clapped her hands together and looked at him apologetically. She insisted with the pretext of paying him back for his loss, but she was simply using this as an excuse to hit on the handsome man.

Xie Lanshan knew her intention but didn't expose her, only responding with a smile, "Unit 2103, my friend." He gave her Shen Liufei's address instead.

The two parted as the rain poured harder. The downpour dimmed the lights around as the young woman stared with a racing heart at Xie Lanshan's tall silhouette, afraid that she would forget the four numbers he gave her. She couldn't find a pen at first and resorted to pulling out her liquid eyeliner to write the number down on her palm. Even this bad weather couldn't sour the girl's good mood; she turned and walked back to her house, humming a song in high spirits.

Xie Lanshan sprinted under the eaves to shelter himself from the rain after being drenched from head to toe. The rain also stopped at a convenient time, leaving only the fresh smell of wet mud around.

He looked at his watch—it was ten minutes until eight. He wasn't in a rush to go home and remembered that stupidly romantic doctor from earlier, then decided to stay a little longer to witness the dramatic confession.

At exactly 8 P.M., Shen Liufei's residential building lit up all at once.

But Xie Lanshan quickly discovered that the heart in the middle was missing one piece—one unit hadn't lit up their room as they'd promised.

(vi)

Old mentor Tao of the Hanhai City municipal bureau was hospitalized. Tao Jun had always been a tough man who refused to rest up when he had a minor injury. It started off with a migraine and fever that he paid little attention to until his son insisted the old man get a checkup at the hospital. There, he discovered it was a dangerous brain

tumor.

The doctor suggested staying in the hospital to monitor the tumor for a few days and to surgically remove it if the tumor didn't spread.

The condition wasn't too awful, but as soon as Tao Jun was hospitalized, the entire violent crimes unit swarmed the hospital room. So many people quickly filled the double room that there was no open space for even a small plant to grow.

Tao Jun was warmed by the visits but still kept his harsh tone as he said, "Are there no cases to work on? Why are you all here?"

Tao Longyue retorted, "Better to not have any cases. You think we should all work with heavy burdens on our shoulders all the time? World peace is a great thing!"

Tao Jun turned his head and saw Xie Lanshan sitting beside the bed, eyes lowered and seemingly elsewhere mentally. He reminded the young cop, "Vice Chief Liu will be in charge of the violent crimes unit while I'm out, so you better not cause any more trouble for him."

Xie Lanshan lifted his gaze but didn't respond.

Tao Jun glared at him and asked harshly, "Do you hear me?"

Xie Lanshan didn't want to talk about Liu Yanbo and changed the topic. "Who's in charge of your surgery, are they reliable?"

"Of course! The most reliable we can get!" Tao Longyue had met the primary doctor in charge of his dad's case and answered, "The neurosurgeon that just came back from the US—what's his name—best in the house!"

Xie Lanshan frowned slightly and pondered when a low and soothing man's voice called from outside the door.

"That's an exaggeration."

The soles of the leather shoes clicked crisply on the ground; the public security officers blocking the doorway immediately dispersed to allow a man to step into the room. White lab coats were not the most flattering for many, as they tended to highlight the figure of the person donning the coat. Most were loose-fitting, like a bedsheet, but on this man, even a bland lab coat looked like shining armor for an elegant and handsome knight.

Xie Lanshan recognized this face and that it was Shen Liufei who followed this handsome doctor into the room. The two men looked close—like brothers—as they stepped inside.

A nurse knocked on the door and timidly reported that a patient next door was demanding to stay in a private ICU room: the commotion was getting out of hand and was becoming even more pressing than a serious medical issue.

Duan Licheng asked, "What's the illness?"

"Nothing too serious, but..." The nurse hesitated, then stood on her tiptoes to whisper something into Duan Licheng's ears. The troublemaker patient was someone of high social status.

“There aren’t many beds in the hospital and I’ve always discouraged opening up extra ICU spaces without a good reason,” Duan Licheng responded sternly and calmly. “I don’t care what his background is, I treat all my patients equally. The turnover rate of empty hospital beds here is well below average, so I plan on reforming the policies starting with these ICU rooms today. Noncritical patients currently staying at the hospital will be forced to leave as soon as possible.”

Tao Longyue shot a glance toward Xie Lanshan. Despite always complaining about Shen Liufei’s undisciplined, Americanized way of work, strangely, the captain found himself bowing down to Duan Licheng’s non-negotiating and almost draconian style of handling the job.

Xie Lanshan felt his stomach churn in disgust. Shen Liufei had agreed to move in with him, but the artist seemed to have vanished from the world over the last three days and hadn’t even called him.

The chatter inside the room completely stopped like a candle extinguishing the moment Duan Licheng walked in. The room turned deathly quiet. As the only female officer in the violent crimes unit, Ding Li’s round eyes fixed on the doctor who walked in and practically transformed into pink hearts.

In contrast, Xie Lanshan’s eyes were burning dry.

With his sharp senses as an experienced cop, Tao Longyue noticed the strange air between the two men. He nudged Xie Lanshan with his arm and whispered, “Keep it low-key, don’t let the old man catch your eyes. Remember, he’s got a tumor in his head—don’t piss him off and make it explode.”

Tao Jun struggled to move on the bed in frustration; he wasn’t used to being so relaxed for extended periods of time.

The old man was from a more conservative generation. It was possible that he could knock himself out from anger if he were to find out about Xie Lanshan’s new romantic interest. Xie Lanshan retracted his gaze and lowered his head.

After paying Tao Jun a visit, Shen Liufei left early. The weight in Xie Lanshan’s heart was fully of frustration, but he couldn’t question the artist in front of Tao Jun. During this brief internal dilemma, Shen Liufei had already walked out of the door with Duan Licheng.

Tao Longyue offered to treat everyone to dinner and wine that night, vaguely implying that he had exciting news to share, but everyone in the violent crimes unit already knew that his proposal to Su Mansheng had been a success.

Xie Lanshan had visited the bar twice with Tao Longyue before. It wasn’t an easy place to find and was small compared to other places, but the owner was friendly and the atmosphere was comparably less stifling. At the center of the bar was a pool table that was free to play for customers.

Xie Lanshan noticed Shen Liufei and Duan Licheng the moment he stepped into the bar—it was an honest coincidence that the two groups had chosen to hang out at

the same place after hours.

Shen Liufei sat in the corner and also noticed Xie Lanshan when he lifted his head. The two exchanged glances across the bar in a spark of mixed emotions before Shen Liufei looked away first.

Tao Longyue instinctively realized something was a little off and asked Xie Lanshan, “I think Shen Liufei and Doctor Duan have things to discuss. How about we move to the other side?”

“The more the merrier, don’t worry.” Xie Lanshan smiled and walked back to his seat with the server.

Ding Li and Xiao Liang also showed up at the bar party. Everyone joined in to play dice games in pairs of two and took shots as punishment for losing a round.

Xie Lanshan was teamed up with Ding Li, who had never played the game before and lost virtually every round. Of course, Xie Lanshan couldn’t possibly let this young girl be forced to take all the punishment shots and offered to drink for her.

The man had a fairly decent alcohol tolerance, but tonight his face glowed red at the touch of liquor. A few more drinks and his eyes were clouded with delusions and his face was crimson like he was already wasted.

Tao Longyue noticed that Xie Lanshan didn’t have his mind on the game as they played and kept looking in Shen Liufei’s direction on the other side. Afraid that alcohol would completely wash away his buddy’s senses, the captain quickly took the other man’s full wine glass and downed the drink before Xie Lanshan even realized.

Shen Liufei seemed to have gotten into an argument with Duan Licheng. The two men both got up and walked away from their seats, heading toward the restroom.

Xie Lanshan popped up from his seat and followed. The two men ended their conversation just as Xie Lanshan rushed over. The young cop saw Duan Licheng wrap an arm around Shen Liufei’s neck tightly in an intimate manner, but the two men in contact stood rigidly and stared at each other with hostility.

Finally, Shen Liufei said coldly, “I don’t need you to remind me what I need to do. I’ve already told you I’ve given up.”

“You sure have changed.” Duan Licheng released his arm and shot a glance back at Xie Lanshan. He then turned on Shen Liufei with a knowing smile and said, “You’ll find out soon enough that you made the wrong decision.”

Every word was like a cryptic message that seemed to hint at an answer related to Xie Lanshan. The young cop tried to decipher them to no avail, feeling more frustrated and annoyed.

Duan Licheng walked past Xie Lanshan as he stepped back to his seat and knocked past the young cop’s shoulders by accident.

“My bad, Officer Xie.” He gave Xie Lanshan a faint smile before lifting his head toward the pool table. “How about we play a few rounds together?”

Everyone in the bar was standing up at this point; some had already made their way around the pool table to watch the match between these two handsome men.

The rules followed fifteen-ball rotation—simple and easy enough to follow. Duan Licheng opened the game with an elegant and easy-going gesture. Yet as soon as the cue ball rolled out, the audience all clicked their tongues; the white ball shot into the pile, and every sphere inside exploded and rolled out chaotically. Now it was still Xie Lanshan's turn.

It was almost as if the man was declaring his loss before he even began. Duan Licheng didn't seem to care and leaned down toward the pool table, gesturing with his cue stick before he straightened his back and held out a hand to signal Xie Lanshan's turn to go.

Of course, Xie Lanshan didn't give his opponent an opportunity to strike back. He held up his cue stick like a professional, bent his back down at a handsome angle, and then narrowed his eyes like a leopard ready to lock in on its prey. His careful control of the cue ball sent a handful of targets into the pockets. Ding Li cheered on from the side. "Nice going, big bro!"

Xie Lanshan didn't even bat an eye at the young girl and instead kept his sharp gaze on his opponent, Duan Licheng, who had been leaning on the side nearby Shen Liufei ever since he stepped away from the pool table, occasionally rubbing the tip of his cue stick with chalk, seemingly unbothered by his imminent loss.

Just as Xie Lanshan was shooting down the last ball, he saw Duan Licheng suddenly turn and lean in close to Shen Liufei. The doctor pressed his lips to the artist's earlobe and gently bit down.

But of course, the doctor's smiling expression and gaze were locked on Xie Lanshan. It was clear provocation.

Like a woken beast, Xie Lanshan's veins popped on his forehead the moment he hit the cue ball. He purposely put in more force than needed, causing the numbered ball to jump out of the table and fly directly toward Duan Licheng's face. Thankfully, the doctor reacted quick enough to dodge the ball before he could take a hit right to his handsome features.

Even Shen Liufei was shocked and scolded him in a harsh tone, "Xie Lanshan."

Duan Licheng smiled and said generously, "Officer Xie had been working hard to protect people on the front lines these past few years; it's not a big deal for him to vent some stress."

Taking the first hit graciously, the doctor's single line had successfully stumped Xie Lanshan and made the cop look extra petty.

"Xie Lanshan, what's going on with you?" Tao Longyue didn't want to offend his old man's primary surgeon and rushed over, whispering into his buddy's ear, "I've never seen you act so aggressive, even when Liu Mingfang tried to tease you in the past."

His own action surprised even Xie Lanshan. The painful headache came just in time as he placed a hand over his forehead, nausea slowly consuming him. "I think... I had a little too much booze..."

Before Tao Longyue could respond, he wobbled out of the bar.

(vii)

After the cold breeze touched his head, Xie Lanshan felt his headache easing up. He didn't want to return home just yet and began wandering the streets. The weather was cooling and the trees by the street were already trimmed with virtually no leaves left on the naked branches. If one were to stand in the middle of the street and look directly forward, it would look as if two rows of balding old men were standing beside them on the streets—what an unsightly image.

Xie Lanshan suddenly felt that following the rules all the time could turn people into these trees on the side of the roads, dull and lifeless.

He raised a hand and ran his long fingers through his hair, and felt quite relieved after a brief ruffle. *Forget about Song Qilian and Shen Liufei's attitudes*, Xie Lanshan thought to himself as he removed his jacket and tossed it over his shoulders. With a smile on his face, he snaked his way along the street like a drunk man, leaving a trail of flowery dance steps on the road.

There weren't many people around, but all eyes were on him. Xie Lanshan didn't mind the attention and even bowed to the strangers, as if he was at a curtain call on stage.

Xie Lanshan was beat by the time he returned home and washed his face in the bathroom, hoping to wake himself up. His forehead heated up even more after a splash of cold water. Xie Lanshan touched his face and looked into the mirror, feeling his vision blur as he attempted to make out the sincerity and kindness on this face, and the darkness and madness.

Suddenly, the soapbox on the counter captured Xie Lanshan's attention. The sink was only adorned by soap and toiletries, but it was clear that someone had moved them. Even though his headache was still acting up, it didn't hinder his cognitive abilities and analytic skills—no detail could escape those sharp eyes of his. Xie Lanshan quickly realized that the person who had been watching him in the dark had snuck inside his house.

He walked out of the bathroom and into his bedroom, immediately noticing that his bed and pillow had been messed with as well. The faint smell of tobacco lingered by his bedside.

Myanmar Twin Tower.

This was a rare brand of cigarette that had a unique and alluringly sweet scent. Xie Lanshan had only ever associated this smell with one person—Mu Kun. The drug lord didn't use despite being engaged in the drug trade, but this was the brand of cigarettes he always smoked.

The light in the bedroom suddenly went off.

The smell of the smoke disgusted Xie Lanshan and worsened his headache. He began searching through his home and picked up a knife when he passed by his kitchen. The window curtain swayed gently, as if a silhouette was lingering behind it; every dark corner in the house looked suspicious. Xie Lanshan carefully trudged forward, his sides twitched in high alert while sweat rolled from his palm, loosening his grip on the knife handle. This horrifying feeling felt familiar—like the last time he was at the boxing bar. He was convinced that Mu Kun was inside his house.

The main door suddenly creaked open, then swayed back and forth. A faint ray of light peeked out from the small gaps of the door like a lamp luring in a moth. Xie Lanshan remembered that he had locked the door when he walked in, but now it was open.

He fixed his gaze on the shadow cast from the faint light outside the door, slowly tracing the figure of a person. Someone was there.

Danger was only inches away, but Xie Lanshan strangely found himself calming down. He held in his breath and quietly made his way toward the door. Xie Lanshan had always known the day would come when Mu Kun found him.

He charged forward the moment the door pushed open, but pulled back the knife just as he was about to slash down.

The light in the hallway was faint and yellow, as the shadows of two men intertwined under the glow. Their eyes met, and Xie Lanshan asked Shen Liufei, “What are you doing here?”

“Visiting my sons.” The artist’s voice was nonchalant, as if he didn’t realize his life had been in danger mere seconds ago. Shen Liufei tried to switch on the light inside as he walked in, but the room remained dark. He turned on the flashlight on his cell phone and checked the main power switch. He then turned and glanced coldly at Xie Lanshan. “You didn’t pay your electricity bill?”

Crisis averted: it was all just a false alarm. Xie Lanshan returned to the living room and leaned back on the sofa, then responded lazily, “I was staying at your place not too long ago, so I forgot.”

Shen Liufei scanned the house briefly before he walked toward Xie Lanshan. “Where are the cats?”

“The little neighbor girl is watching over them for me for a few days.” After relaxing himself from his high tension, Xie Lanshan could feel his head throbbing once again. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temple, then said almost coldly, “No sons today, you can go back now.”

This was one of the rare times Shen Liufei had received the cold shoulder from Xie Lanshan, but he didn’t seem to mind. Instead, he invited himself in and sat down right next to the man. Shen Liufei reached out a hand and placed it on Xie Lanshan’s forehead, then remarked lightly, “You’re burning up.”

Xie Lanshan harshly pushed the artist’s hand away. He had his own pride and was insistent on refusing any sort of kind gesture; he couldn’t hide the sourness in his eyes

as he glanced toward Shen Liufei. The artist's gaze fell down on the coffee table as he carefully rearranged the items with the flashlight from his cell phone. The man clearly didn't think of himself as a guest, nor did he seem to mind the events that had happened at the bar tonight.

Xie Lanshan pulled the cell phone resting on the coffee table and shone it under his chin, making an ugly face at Shen Liufei.

It would have been scarier if he was a woman with long hair. Xie Lanshan's hair was only a little longer than most men, but not long enough to cover his face, making it look more funny than scary. Shen Liufei was unfazed, as usual. The unimpressed look from his gaze judged the man's childish act. Xie Lanshan also felt he was being silly and placed the cell phone down, shooting a grin at Shen Liufei.

His smile was brilliant and bright, but his gaze was both pure and tempting; the dichotomy of these expressions made him seem extra attractive.

As if his heartstrings were a kite tugged on by the wind, Shen Liufei reached out and pulled Xie Lanshan into an embrace. Then, he pressed his lips to the other's ear and said with confidence and gentleness, "Trust me."

The last bit of lingering frustration within Xie Lanshan vanished with this warm embrace. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to drown in this rare moment of peace before he finally opened his eyes and said, "Okay."

This clear and easy response instead shocked Shen Liufei. He let go of Xie Lanshan and asked in surprise, "Just like that?"

Xie Lanshan lifted an eyebrow and smiled. "We've already slept together. Just how much more complicated do you want our relationship to get, cuz?"

Shen Liufei also smiled—or perhaps it wasn't exactly a smile—those thin lips moved slightly, like a fleeting mirage.

"I have to correct your comment earlier; I love you, not only because of your noble soul, but because unruly hormones also define us."

His expression was relatively blank despite those passionate words and his heavy breathing. Xie Lanshan's grin grew deeper as he leaned forward and pressed his lips against Shen Liufei's mouth. "Bite me."

And he did. Shen Liufei bit gently on Xie Lanshan's lower lip, adding a bit of pressure with every nibble. After a deep kiss, he began unbuttoning Xie Lanshan's clothes. It only took two buttons before Shen Liufei grew impatient and ripped off Xie Lanshan's shirt, exposing those alluring shoulders and firm chest muscles, until all clothes were removed from that silky white skin tinged by pinkish vitality.

Shen Liufei traced the lines on Xie Lanshan's body with gentle kisses as if drawing on a white canvas, from top to bottom. Biting his chin, neck, nipples, and every corner of the body, until Xie Lanshan's cold skin began heating up through this sensation. The cop also felt his throat drying and breathing grow heavy. Yet despite being pushed to his limit, Shen Liufei refused to let desire cloud his judgement and slowly took off his shirt as he suppressed his raw instincts.

The man was always devoid of emotion. Like the cooling weather outside, he was calm and collected even in the heat of the moment—distant and restrained. Yet the secrets this man had didn't hinder Xie Lanshan's understanding of his lover's personality. With a hand on his cheek, Xie Lanshan leaned to the side and parted his legs with ease. He rested a leg on the sofa's armrest and stuck another leg onto Shen Liufei's crotch, pressing on it with the tip of his toes with a smirk on his face like an annoying tease.

"Stay put." Shen Liufei's expression was still blank, but he could feel his lower body heating up uncomfortably as blood began to pump. He grabbed onto Xie Lanshan's ankle and pulled it over his shoulder, pressing the cop down beneath him.

Xie Lanshan lifted himself up slightly, exposing his energized cock as it pointed toward Shen Liufei's face.

"Where's the lube?" Shen Liufei glanced at Xie Lanshan's hole before feeling his temples twitch.

"Forgot to buy some." Xie Lanshan grabbed Shen Liufei's hand and stuck the artist's index finger in his mouth, covering it in his saliva before doing the same to the middle finger. He then said, after letting go of Shen Liufei's hand, "Make do with this, I'll just deal with it this once."

Shen Liufei played gently around the hole for a little bit before sticking his wet fingers into Xie Lanshan.

There was indeed a fever; Shen Liufei could feel that Xie Lanshan was warmer than usual. He twisted around and began searching to find a different angle inside as Xie Lanshan's leg tensed, moving along with the foreign object inside his body.

Xie Lanshan was immovable when he felt a third finger inside. Shen Liufei only felt the pain on his temple increase as he grew harder in his pants. Finally, he pulled down his clothes and pressed the hardened organ on Xie Lanshan's hole.

While this wasn't their first time, Shen Liufei still leaned down, frowning, as he cupped Xie Lanshan's cheek with a free hand. He then said sternly as if requesting permission, "I'm going in."

"Hey, cuz, you're flustered." Xie Lanshan chuckled. He raised a hand to touch Shen Liufei's burning face before lifting his own up to kiss those warm lips.

Both men were absorbed in the moment, all attention on each other, and didn't notice a pair of reddened eyes watching them outside the window.

Mu Kun saw it all. He saw Xie Lanshan allow another man enter him. He saw Xie Lanshan's arms wrapped around another man's neck. He saw Xie Lanshan's legs around the other man's waist. He saw Xie Lanshan's body move rhythmically with the thrust of the other man, and heard the moans and cries during their climaxes.

Mu Kun was inexplicably pained by this scene.

Xie Lanshan's every kiss with this other man was like a cut into his flesh; Mu Kun felt as if he was on fire, from both rage and desire. He stood in the dark, allowing the blaze to consume him until he was burned to a crisp.

Xie Lanshan had claimed he was only interested in women. He'd believed it. He'd agonizingly believed it.

The Girl and the Goldfish

The next morning, an emergency call from Tao Longyue woke Xie Lanshan from a sweet slumber in his bed. From the other side of the call, Tao Longyue could hear the mumbling complaints from the two men; one whining about his sore waist while the other grumbled about a headache. The captain forced himself to take in a deep breath before announcing that they discovered a female corpse by the bar they were at last night.

This news woke both men up. Tao Longyue came to pick Xie Lanshan up to head over to the crime scene; Xie Lanshan grabbed his uniform in one hand and a lunchbox his lover made in the other, kissed Shen Liufei goodbye in a rush, and left the house. The iconic car was already waiting outside the residential area. Tao Longyue yawned and waved lethargically as the car door opened—the captain clearly was still not awake.

"I'll drive." Passing along the bag of breakfast to Tao Longyue, Xie Lanshan kicked his buddy out of the driver's seat and took over.

"He can cook and do chores too? Congrats on scoring a perfect partner." Tao Longyue teased Xie Lanshan as he took in the fresh smell of the breakfast sandwich. He picked up the sandwich, layered with eggs, mashed vegetables, and fish, and added, "Don't think he's the type to warm your bed up though."

"Finish your breakfast," Xie Lanshan remarked as he held in his laughter. "Get some sleep first. I'll wake you up when we arrive."

Still hungover, Tao Longyue downed the sandwich and leaned his head back on the passenger seat and closed his eyes.

Xie Lanshan started the engine and shot his friend a glance as he turned the steering wheel; young Captain Tao of the violent crimes unit was certainly not a traditionally handsome man, but he had a burly physique and energetic spirit. Even that scar on his face was normally glowing like a badge of honor—this defeated look was certainly not fitting for the young man. Xie Lanshan had been up with Shen Liufei for the entire night and still felt a bit of heat in his head, but he certainly wasn't as tired as his buddy. He laughed and asked, "Why are you so tired? Last party of freedom right before your marriage?"

"My ass!" Tao Longyue's eyes shot open as he turned to Xie Lanshan, annoyed. "We left not long after you walked out and I had to go care for the old man in the hospital that night; he scolded me the whole night because of your situation!"

This shocked Xie Lanshan. "My situation? What did I do?"

Tao Longyue sat upright. “What, didn’t you know that Song Qilian gave Vice Chief Liu your therapy report?”

Xie Lanshan nodded. “I thought that report was going directly to the provincial branch.”

Tao Longyue gave a slight pout. “I don’t know about sending it there, but Liu Yanbo personally came by the hospital last night and told the old man about it.”

Tao Longyue’s nagging middle-aged woman’s tone of voice was already giving away a hint of unpleasant news. Xie Lanshan pondered slightly and asked, “What did Qilian’s report say?”

“Ah, there was a lot on there and a bunch of jargon I couldn’t understand.” Tao Longyue let out a long sigh as expected and said, “The point is, the report she gave to Liu Yanbo said that you didn’t pass your mental stability check. There was something about how you have a severely violent nature that makes you very incompatible with investigative missions of high stress and danger levels. So, in consideration to prevent you from breaking the code of conduct and law, she suggested that you still be transferred to the traffic department.”

Xie Lanshan had already guessed this based on Song Qilian’s strange attitude toward him lately; he clenched tightly onto the steering wheel without a word.

Tao Longyue continued, “Liu Yanbo has always had beef with you. Remember how you caused a ruckus last time during his wife’s birthday party because of Liu Mingfang? I’m sure he’s ready to put you in the spotlight again with this report. When the old man asked me what exactly happened, I could only say that Qilian’s grown to have a love-hate relationship with you. She knows she can’t have you, so she could only slander you—”

Xie Lanshan interrupted him coldly, “Qilian’s not that kind of person.”

It annoyed Tao Longyue that his buddy was still a hoes-before-bros man at a time like this, and he raised his voice to question back, “So you would have rather I said you were a criminal in training?”

Xie Lanshan didn’t mind taking slander and repeated firmly with his gaze still fixed on the road, “She’s not that kind of person.”

There was a quiet and hidden park near the bar where an old man discovered a half-naked woman’s corpse hidden behind leaves on his morning run. The sudden scare was so shocking it almost gave him a heart attack. The scene of the crime was already locked down.

If it wasn’t for the corpse, rows of police cars parked around the scene, and the bright yellow cordon tapes, it would have been a beautifully quiet autumn day. The chirping of birds and falling yellow leaves would have embellished the tranquil scenery.

The young woman’s face was half-buried in the dirt, her blouse ripped and dirtied while her lower body was completely exposed. On her neck was a black dog collar decorated with a metal rivet. The corpse was already rotting and releasing an

unbearably foul smell. An eerie green spider-web-like pattern appeared beneath her deathly pale skin.

Su Mansheng was at the scene doing her initial autopsy as usual. As one of the very few female forensic doctors able to do fieldwork in Hanhai City, her professionalism and work ethic were reflected in her focused gaze and unfazed expression.

"Our initial findings suggest that the victim's time of death was three days ago. There are signs of injuries on her skull and it's very likely she was brutally violated before death..."

Su Mansheng turned the woman's body over; the corner of her mouth was slit open by a sharp knife and then had been sewn back up by fabric needles. There was nothing but despair frozen in those bulging eyes that contrasted with the forced smile slit into her face; the dichotomy of expressions made it extra unnerving to look at. Xie Lanshan was taken aback as he saw the face of the corpse. "It's her?"

Tao Longyue asked, "You've seen her before?"

Xie Lanshan nodded. "She lived in the same residential building as Shen Liufei. I've seen her a couple of times before."

"This is not the original scene of the murder, it's the location the culprit disposed of the corpse after committing the crime. Inside the victim's bag..." As Su Mansheng lifted a small piece of pink fabric that covered the stomach of the corpse, everyone simultaneously gasped.

A large butterfly-shaped piece of skin had been carved and ripped from the woman's stomach.

Xie Lanshan was stunned as if someone had cast a spell on him; he could feel cold sweat pouring out like a waterfall from his skin, and a chilling sensation crawled up his spine.

Tao Longyue noticed his friend's unnatural reaction and called out to him, concerned, "A-Lan? A-Lan?"

"My head... kind of hurts..." A woman, fresh blood, ripped skin, a dirty and messy crime scene... A strange sense of familiarity paralyzed Xie Lanshan's whole body. It took him a long while before he finally pulled his mind back onto the case. It puzzled him as he lied about the headache, wondering why his instinct was to lie and pretend nothing was wrong.

The corpse needed to be transported back to the bureau for a more detailed autopsy. Because Xie Lanshan recognized the victim, it didn't take long for the investigation team to confirm her identity. Work quickly consumed the team, and they had no time to rest.

Tao Longyue took the wheel on the way back. Xie Lanshan sat in the passenger seat, rested his head on an arm, and looked out the window. His eyebrows had been pressed together since they left the crime scene, as if something was on his mind.

“I feel like this case looks familiar... hey, Xie Lanshan?” Tao Longyue intended to discuss the case but didn’t receive any response after calling out to his buddy a few times. He figured his colleague was having another headache episode and said, concerned, “So what’s up with your health anyway? You’ve got this headache thing going for a while, and now it’s both headaches and fevers. Are you sure you don’t want to get a good brain checkup with Duan Licheng? I’m telling you, this guy’s a real genius...”

Tao Longyue didn’t notice the straightforward conflict Xie Lanshan had with Duan Licheng that night at the bar, so naturally, he wouldn’t know about the complicated beef the two men had. But Xie Lanshan couldn’t even spare a moment to think about Duan Licheng right now—he was almost certain he had seen a case similar to this murder before.

(ii)

There was no traffic on the road and it didn’t take long to reach the municipal bureau. As soon as Tao Longyue and Xie Lanshan stepped out of the car, they noticed Song Qilian walking into the main building not too far away. Xie Lanshan could recognize her silhouette just from a glance. That slightly wistful and spiritless figure was very easy to spot. Song Qilian was a much more energetic and bright young woman in the past, but an unhappy marriage completely changed her demeanor. Xie Lanshan had noticed ever since returning from his undercover mission that the woman had grown only more melancholic and distant than before. Tao Longyue assumed she was here for Xie Lanshan’s therapy report.

Yet Xie Lanshan also saw Liu Mingfang chasing after Song Qilian, attempting to reach an arm over her shoulders. Song Qilian pushed him aside, but the man didn’t take the hint and continued to pester her.

Xie Lanshan took a few steps forward and pushed the annoying Liu Mingfang aside. He said coldly, “This is the bureau. Leave if you have no business here.”

Liu Mingfang shot back, “What about the bureau? The bureau’s also a public branch that serves the people. You think this is some Qing dynasty political office where you can just sit behind a government banner and not do any work behind the doors?”

Xie Lanshan wasn’t in the mood to argue with Liu Mingfang. He shifted his gaze toward Song Qilian to get a reaction; if the woman wanted this annoying ex-husband to leave her alone, he would not hesitate to kick the man out by force.

But Song Qilian only stared at him dumbly before turning her head and said to Liu Mingfang, “Mingfang, please let me have a few words with him alone.”

“As you wish.” Liu Mingfang proudly straightened himself and walked past Xie Lanshan, purposely shoving the latter’s shoulder as he passed. He gave the cop a look as if to say, “This is our family’s business—stay out of it, outsider.”

Xie Lanshan stood frozen on the spot; he wasn't upset, simply confused. It wasn't until Liu Mingfang stalked far off that he finally opened his mouth again and said, "I didn't know you two were back together already."

"It's not like that. We just happened to run into each other on the road." Song Qilian didn't want to pursue the discussion further and changed the topic with a professional tone, "If it's about your report, I've only reported the facts. I hope you don't hold a grudge against me for it."

"Of course not." Xie Lanshan gave her a faint smile.

This smile threw Song Qilian into a daze. Xie Lanshan had always been this kind to her in the past and never given her an attitude, regardless of how he felt. There was always something tranquil but soothing in that gaze of his.

"Transferring to the traffic department isn't necessarily a bad thing for you, and it's also my professional recommendation..." Song Qilian's voice began cracking as she repeated, "I'm sorry," through her tears.

Xie Lanshan reached out a finger and pressed it gently on her lips. He brushed his finger to swipe away a tear from her face.

"It's nothing, don't worry about it," Xie Lanshan said. The smile on his face grew more gentle. "Chief Liu is waiting for you still. Go find him."

Song Qilian turned to give Xie Lanshan one more look before she stepped upstairs. The man was still standing in the same spot. It was as if he was still standing on a hot summer day ten years ago, looking back at her.

Before pursuing Song Qilian, Liu Mingfang had actually received news from his son, Liu Chang—his mother had banned the child from going near "Uncle Xie."

Liu Mingfang immediately realized that something must have happened between his ex-wife and her old crush, which meant that his chance to win her back was now. He had multiple accounts of cheating and domestic violence after marriage, and the list of awful deeds went on. Of course, like almost every other man out there, Liu Mingfang quickly regretted his actions as soon as he divorced her. He wanted to win her love back.

With Tao Jun hospitalized, Liu Yanbo was tasked with handling day-to-day operations in the bureau. For the first time, Liu Mingfang returned home early and waited patiently for his father's return.

Liu Yanbo heard from the nanny in his household upon his return that his son was already waiting for him in the study. He opened the door to find his son searching through his desk for something. He scolded the young man, "Mingfang, what are you doing?!"

"I dropped my wedding ring at home. Auntie said she picked it up and kept it in your study." While the wide desk blocked his old man's view into the room, Liu Mingfang discreetly took off the ring from his finger and shoved it inside the wooden pen holder to create this lie.

“The only things inside the drawer are important documents from the bureau. Your nanny knows that and wouldn’t touch it, so hands off!” Liu Yanbo really didn’t know how to deal with this son of his sometimes; he still remembered how he’d had to lower his head to his subordinates last time because of Li Guochang’s case. The pent-up frustration exploded as soon as he saw his son, and he couldn’t help but scold the young man, “You should have learned your lesson after you got yourself caught up in such a big case last time!”

Liu Mingfang was already an adult man but still acted like a child in front of his father. He swiftly closed the drawer to his father’s desk and sat on the sofa, then smiled playfully. “Y’know, they say fish always begin rotting from the head. I’m still your son. Sure, I make mistakes sometimes, but you know that I’m not a bad person at heart!”

Liu Yanbo’s expression remained unfazed as he walked toward his desk and found the diamond ring in his pen holder with his sharp eyes. He pulled out the ring and handed it to his son. “Is this what you’re looking for?”

Liu Mingfang faked surprise and received it gleefully, “Finally! I’m planning on winning Qilian back with this ring.”

This one line struck the right chord in the old man’s heart. He also didn’t want his own grandson to call another woman his mother and immediately turned to his son. “Qilian is a fine woman, you little shit. Better not screw up again when you bring your wife back!”

Liu Mingfang nodded his head and said, “Yes, yes, you can count on your son.”

Liu Yanbo continued to nag at his unreliable son after recalling all the nasty rumors in the past and said, “I’ve heard that you’re still in contact with Li Guochang’s American wife. Is this true?”

“Nah, we broke up after she flew back.” Liu Mingfang said, “She’s a widow with a fortune behind her, she’s a hotcake in the dating scene now.”

“I’ve also heard you’ve been getting close to some sort of antique investor lately. What’s her name again, Miss T or something?”

“Man, where’d you get all this gossip, Dad?” Liu Mingfang carefully checked his expression and gave a nonchalant laugh. “We’re just business partners, don’t think too much of it.”

“As long as you two are not in *that* kind of relationship.” Liu Yanbo sighed and sat down beside his son. “You can’t just say you want to win Qilian back. You need to act on it properly like a man.”

Liu Mingfang nodded repeatedly like a puppet. He noticed his father’s expression softened and attempted to probe by saying, “Dad, your daughter-in-law has been having some issues with her ex-crush... sorry—I mean old classmate, do you know what’s up with Xie Lanshan lately?”

Liu Yanbo was well aware of how lenient he had been with his son due to putting his career as a drug enforcement officer before family. He was always fighting on the

front lines and spent little time with his family, so he wasn't around to properly educate Liu Mingfang. That was why he was quite envious of Tao Jun; his comrade's son was clearly much more accomplished as a young captain of the violent crimes unit, and a skilled investigator who had earned many awards.

But no matter how much of a failure his own son was, he still believed that his son was better than Xie Jiaqing's offspring.

Liu Yanbo frowned and fell silent for a while before he finally said, "To be fair, in terms of raw skills and abilities, the captain of the violent crimes unit should have been young Xie. I was originally planning on promoting him myself, but..."

Liu Mingfang sniffed out something through his father's hesitation and asked, "But what?"

Liu Yanbo let out another sigh. "But even if young Xie's got the skills, he fails in the department of psychological stability. Almost as soon as he returned from his undercover mission, Captain Sui from the Blue Foxes personally gave me a call to say I must not promote him. He even asked me to carefully monitor his behavior and attitude, and report upward immediately if any issues occurred."

Liu Mingfang was shocked. "But why? Didn't he return after earning huge accolades from going undercover in the Golden Triangle?"

"There's a rumor that young Xie is a traitor from the drug enforcement team, that he was the one who let the Golden Triangle's drug lord, Mu Kun, escape. But I don't think Captain Sui believes this rumor, judging from his attitude." Liu Yanbo lifted his eyelids slightly; a sharp glint flashing across those half-opened eyes. "Besides, that child's father—"

His voice stopped abruptly as he turned to his son, expression grave as he scolded, "Stop asking about all these things that have nothing to do with you!"

The violent crimes and homicide unit spent days working overtime and quickly discovered the identity of the female victim behind the park. She was Luo Xin, a twenty-three-year-old freelancer who lived on the tenth floor of the same building as Shen Liufei. Judging by the level of decay on the corpse, the estimated time of death was last Sunday between 7 and 8 P.M.—the time that doctor named, Qiao Hui, was planning on professing his love using the lights of the building.

The window that didn't light up that night was Luo Xin's residence.

The tech team made another discovery at the same time. They found a four-digit number written on the right palm, which could be a dying message left by the victim. Even though it was virtually impossible to tell what the number was after heavy rain had washed it away, the tech team was successfully able to recreate it—2103.

The investigators didn't retrieve any bodily substances left on Luo Xin from the suspect, but luckily, there were still some skin cells left under her fingernails.

Naturally, they all went to check the DNA sample in the official database of the bureau, but the result stunned everyone.

The DNA belonged to Xie Lanshan.

(iii)

Xie Lanshan was imprisoned for a short while in order to go undercover in the Golden Triangle, so the public security database had rightfully recorded his DNA. Of course, no one knew that Sui Hong had once tampered with the data and secretly uploaded Ye Shen's information in the past.

There were six questioning rooms within the Hanhai City municipal bureau; some were decorated to be more comfortable than others with wide spaces and bright lights, while others had metal bars over the windows, ropes on the tables, and tear gas canisters in the corner of the room. The latter were normally reserved for suspects of more serious offenses in order to stop them from attempting to escape.

This was the first time Xie Lanshan sat inside this dimly lit room with metal bars outside the window as a suspect. Like how the metal bars separated two worlds inside and out, he went from the interrogator to the interrogated. Due to his cooperation and the simplicity of the case in the past, he hadn't had to suffer through this kind of treatment when he had to spend six months in jail for his mission.

Along with Tao Longyue was Xiao Liang to conduct the questioning. The latter still couldn't break out of his habit of using his customary courteous language around Xie Lanshan. He scratched his ears almost sheepishly before his senior at the table and said, "Sorry, Xie bro, but you know we gotta walk through the process—"

Tao Longyue didn't let his personal biases distract him from work and interrupted Xiao Liang harshly, "There are no 'Xie bros' in the room, only a criminal suspect!"

Xie Lanshan nodded and gave his buddy a difficult smile. "Understood."

Even though Captain Tao refused to believe that Xie Lanshan was the true culprit deep down, he still had to do his job and asked, "The surveillance showed that you left Shen Liufei's residential building at 7:10 P.M. on Sunday. So where were you during the time of the murder, from 7:10 P.M. to 8 P.M.?"

Xie Lanshan responded calmly, "I ran into the victim not too far away from the building. I left quickly after a brief exchange with her."

"And then?"

"I was waiting out the rain under the eaves." There was a security camera installed on the metal bars; the red lights flashed repeatedly and gave Xie Lanshan a headache, which only grew worse.

"So you don't have any witnesses?" Tao Longyue frowned as the siren in his mind rang. He pondered a little and continued, "It's late fall now. Most people have already switched to more appropriate clothing for the weather. There would be no reason under normal circumstances for anyone to take off their clothes and lift their sleeves up; the scratches on your arms are clearly abnormal. So can we safely assume that the injury was caused by violent scratching and resistance from the victim when you

raped and killed her?"

The words "rape" and "murder" stung his ears; Xie Lanshan let out a small breath. He understood Tao Longyue's attitude at work and attempted to respond as cooperatively as he could. "I was helping Shen Liufei move that day. I ran into Duan Licheng while halfway through packing and got into a fight with the doctor, so I forgot to bring my jacket when I walked out the door—"

A bright light suddenly shot right into his eyes, piercing into his pupils, and layering a white mist over his eyes. Xie Lanshan's head throbbed violently from this strong light—something in his head snapped at that moment. His brain was like a broken machine desperately trying to operate nonstop. The buzzing sounds consumed his thoughts.

Xiao Liang shined a strong light right into Xie Lanshan's eyes and howled, "Tell us the truth!"

This was a common method used in interrogation against suspects who were uncooperative and refused to speak. The investigator would shine a bright light before the suspect's eyes and holler to break the suspect psychologically.

Xiao Liang said, "You've been seen going in and out of Shen Liufei's home very often before that time, so the victim mistook you as her neighbor. You released your anger from the fight you had earlier on the victim you happened to pass by, so the victim had your unit number written on her palm before she died..."

This powerful, threatening interrogation scene wasn't just familiar, it was like a reenactment of a past event. Xie Lanshan didn't dare to open his eyes as he lowered his head and pounded on his temples every once in a while to stop the buzzing noise in his ears. It was too painful. It was so painful he could feel the blood exerting pressure on his temples as it rushed up, expanded, and exploded in his head. Finally, a bloody spiderweb surfaced under the fair skin on his handsome face.

Tao Longyue noticed the discomfort on his old friend's face and asked, worried, "What's wrong?"

Tao Longyue was speaking, Xiao Liang was also speaking, but Xie Lanshan couldn't process even a word of it. He could almost feel heavy waves pounding on his eardrums more violently with each thump; upon closer analysis, he discovered those sounds were actually human voices. They came from a foreign world, commotions made by countless strangers he'd never seen, but they all seemed to know who he was.

He managed to capture a familiar name in this cacophonous symphony. It was from a scene similar to the predicament he was in right now, and the investigator in front of him said, "Ye Shen, tell us the truth. Did you kill the victim, Miss Zhuo..."

The noise stopped abruptly, and the headache also healed within an instant. The man felt his soul float up from the crowded sounds around him and fly out toward the edge of the sky. Xie Lanshan opened his eyes slowly; heavy drops of sweat rolled down from the side of his forehead.

“Xie Lanshan?” Tao Longyue noticed the peculiar expression on Xie Lanshan’s face and grew even more worried. “A-Lan? A-Lan, what’s wrong?”

As if his soul was being pried from his body, Xie Lanshan did not speak another word, whether he faced another harsh interrogation or concerned questioning.

Young Captain Tao was in a hurry to help clear his buddy’s innocence, but Xie Lanshan’s silent attitude only perpetuated the current suspicion of his alleged crimes. Tao Longyue poured his heart and soul to talk to the man but failed to even get a word out of Xie Lanshan. He finally lost his cool and said, “I’m going out for a smoke break. You’re also an investigator, so you should know that using silence to hide from your crimes will never work out. Think about it for a bit!”

Tao Longyue got up and walked toward the door in anger, then stopped right before he left and turned to yell at a dumbfounded Xiao Liang, “You come out too!”

Almost as soon as Xiao Liang stepped out, he felt his captain grab the back of his head and give him a hard and loud slap.

“Cap’n, why are you hitting me?” Xiao Liang rubbed the back of his head and sheepishly scrunched his face.

“Why are you waving around the flashlight like that? Who said that was acceptable behavior in the room!”

Judging by this attitude and words, the captain was clearly scolding him for being too harsh. Xiao Liang felt even more wronged and complained, “You were the one that said there’s no ‘Xie bro’ in the interrogation room, only a criminal suspect.”

Tao Longyue walked back into the violent crimes unit office with a heavy heart. He leaned on the wall with a cigarette in hand, silently puffing out clouds of white smoke. Xie Lanshan’s attitude was both infuriating and suspicious.

A sexual assault murder case with abuse after death was serious enough to stir up a social storm across the country. Vice Chief Liu Yanbo personally administered and was leading the investigation for this case. Liu Yanbo arrived at the violent crimes office and noticed the gloomy faces across the entire unit. No one was researching the case, so he cleared his throat loudly for attention.

The entire unit looked up to see the vice chief in office and called out in unison, “Chief Liu!”

Tao Longyue quickly extinguished his cigarette and turned to Liu Yanbo, asking, “Chief, what are you doing here?”

With his direct subordinate officer being detained as the first suspect of the case, it was natural that Liu Yanbo had to keep an eye on any updates. His hawk eyes locked on Tao Longyue and he asked sternly, “Did you get anything out of him?”

Tao Longyue responded honestly, “I didn’t get much info; he was quite cooperative at first but stopped responding halfway through.”

Liu Yanbo shot a harsh glance at the man, anger written on his face. “What’s wrong, are you not going to continue just because you can’t get answers out of him?”

Tao Longyue stuttered slightly as he said, “I just don’t think a-Lan is the culprit. He... there’s no reason for him to be...”

Ding Li chimed in from the side, “Cap’n, it’s not that I don’t believe in our big bro, but remember that mass murder case with the Cong family? Didn’t we find the culprit Li Rui’s skin cells under the victim’s nails too?”

Before Tao Longyue could shoot a harsh glance at her, Liu Yanbo scolded, “Don’t get too sentimental about work. Don’t you remember what Qilian’s therapy report for him said? It was clearly written on there that he’s extremely prone to act with violence.”

Tao Longyue tried to argue back and said, “But a medical report can’t be used as direct evidence in court. At most it’s only a supplemental reference—”

“Then why isn’t he saying anything? Don’t you think it’s suspicious that an experienced law enforcement officer would choose to use this method to fight against criminal questioning?!” Liu Yanbo once again interrupted Tao Longyue harshly and slammed on the table. “Send out a search warrant and bring out the polygraph. We are going to make him speak up using all methods allowed within the limits of the law!”

The revered Vice Chief Liu walked in and out of the office like a storm, leaving the entire violent crimes and homicide unit staring dumbly at each other in the office. Influenced by their colleagues and surroundings, more than half of the team had worked with Xie Lanshan for almost three years and refused to believe the man could commit such a heinous crime.

Of course, Liu Yanbo’s words gave Tao Longyue some ideas; the young captain’s expression darkened as he rubbed his scar with a finger, tracing back his memories. He quickly realized that Liu Yanbo wasn’t purposely giving Xie Lanshan a hard time; the latter’s attitude throughout the case had been very abnormal. Digging deeper into it, the man himself had been acting strange lately. He recalled the words the man said in Xiao Zhou’s hospital room during Li Guochang’s case, and Xie Lanshan’s strangely cold and bloodthirsty gaze when Qin Ke had died...

His personality, attitude, habits, and all sorts of other trivial details from everyday life began to string together into a series of related events. Guessing, suspicion, and conspiracy theories—once a hint of these negative thoughts surfaced, they would spread and grow like an unstoppable virus.

Seeing Tao Longyue stand still, deep in thought, Ding Li carefully asked, “Cap’n Tao, so... what do we do now?”

Tao Longyue closed his eyes and let out a long sigh. “What else can we do? Boss gave the orders, bring out the polygraph.”

“Captain Tao, may I request to speak to Xie Lanshan in private?”

Tao Longyue looked up and saw Shen Liufei walk into the office. The latter’s gaze was deep and unfathomable, his expression blank and cold.

Shen Liufei was only a specialist of the bureau, and it was difficult to say whether he could be considered a close friend or family to Xie Lanshan with their relationship.

Letting him meet with Xie Lanshan in private would clearly violate proper conduct.

"Uh..." Tao Longyue hesitated.

"Five minutes," Shen Liufei said, "just give me five minutes."

Captain Tao nodded. To avoid stepping on Chief Liu's toes again, he had Xiao Liang discreetly take Shen Liufei to the interrogation room Xie Lanshan was staying in.

The room was like a metal cell lit by a deathly bright and pale light. After the headache that had been bothering him suddenly vanished, Xie Lanshan found himself strangely dispirited. He sat with his head hanging behind the metal bars, his gaze lifeless, as if everything in the world was monochrome. Only the moment Shen Liufei walked in did he finally see a flash of color and life in this dead world.

He lifted his head and gave Shen Liufei a smile.

Shen Liufei sat on the other side of the table and lifted his gaze to look at Xie Lanshan. He almost couldn't stand looking at the man; it had only been a day or two, but the young cop looked like a completely different person now. His hair seemed to have grown out a little more. The sweat on his face was still wet, and drenched strands of hair were glued onto his cheeks. Xie Lanshan looked as if he had suffered through a long torturous episode, and was already severely damaged, both physically and mentally.

To everyone's surprise, Xie Lanshan spoke up before Shen Liufei opened his mouth. As if trying to ease up the heavy air around them, he smiled; his smile was beautiful like a spring field of flowers, his white teeth peeked out from a grin that didn't look like it could belong to a criminal suspect. He called out with that usual playful tone, "Hey, cuz."

That gentle voice reached Shen Liufei's chest, and he felt his heart skip a beat and responded softly in acknowledgment.

"Cuz," Xie Lanshan called him again and asked with a smile, "You didn't lie to me, right?"

Shen Liufei returned a question, "Lie about what?"

Xie Lanshan said, "About Zhuo Tian's file."

"It's not a lie." Shen Liufei looked directly into Xie Lanshan's eyes and then said after a moment of silence, "You're a good cop, you're Xie Lanshan."

Yet Xie Lanshan leaned back slightly at this response—it was a very small gesture, but it was clear enough to show his distrust and repulsion.

"Hah." He laughed so much that his eyes reddened. A single tear rolled down his cheek. He said, "But I saw it. I saw those corpses lying on the ground... it wasn't just the girl that died, there was also a child of about only seven or eight..."

Five minutes went by like a breeze. Tao Longyue stood by the door of the room and said he would take Xie Lanshan to the evidence identification center for a polygraph test.

A polygraph specialist from the bureau conducted the test. Xie Lanshan's chest, fingers, and arms were all connected to special wires. The test began with some simple yes or no questions to record the physical patterns of Xie Lanshan's heart rate for reference.

Once the preparations were ready, the test officially began. The specialist started off by asking the suspect's name, "Who are you?"

The polygraph test room was very quiet. Xie Lanshan lifted his eyes and looked at the conductor silently before answering, "Xie Lanshan."

"W-what's going on?!" Outside the glass window, both Liu Yanbo and Tao Longyue let out a gasp of shock at the same time.

It was only the first question, but the polygraph was already showing abnormalities; the line chart on the laptop screen began fluctuating rapidly.

(iv)

The case was exceptionally complex and serious. Xie Lanshan had been detained for forty-eight hours already and Shen Liufei paid a visit to Tao Jun during this time at Puren Hospital. Tao Jun's surgery went well; the old man was in good spirits, even while hospitalized for recovery, and was already whining to leave the hospital. Tao Longyue found some spare time in between investigating this murder to visit his father but didn't speak a word about Xie Lanshan's involvement as a prime suspect of the case. He feared scaring the old man.

The sky was already dark at dusk; chilly winds blew in the autumn weather behind the closed windows of the hospital room. Shen Liufei sat against the light by the bedside, preparing an apple for Tao Jun. He held a fruit knife in his left hand and an apple in the right, peeling the skin off swiftly in a clean motion.

Tao Jun had long been acquainted with Shen Liufei through the phone and emails since they started discussing criminal psychology cases ten years ago but never in person. Of course, he had some guesses about Shen Liufei's appearance prior to their meeting. He knew the expert was in his thirties but didn't expect to find Shen Liufei to be such a handsome and tall young man. He stared at Shen Liufei briefly before blurting out, "I didn't know you were left-handed."

Tao Jun had exchanged many letters with Mr. Shen in the past. Elegant and smooth writing were often featured in the handwritten letters he had received.

Shen Liufei lifted his head slightly to look at the old man without a word.

Tao Jun explained, "That Li'l Liang from our team is also a lefty, so if we make him write a report with ink he'll smudge the ink all over the paper." After some thought, the old man also found his question to be strange. He then added with a smile, "I guess people are different."

Shen Liufei lifted the corner of his mouth and switched the knife to his right hand to continue peeling the apple without an issue, implying that he was ambidextrous. As

soon as he finished, he asked Tao Jun courteously, “Should I cut them into slices for you?”

Tao Jun shook his head. “No need for a brute like myself.”

Shen Liufei handed the apple to him and wiped his hand on the paper towel by the bedstand. He then said, “Captain Tao, I’m actually here today for a case.”

Tao Jun took a bite of the crunchy and sweet apple. “Whose case?”

Shen Liufei said, “Xie Lanshan.”

Tao Jun’s expression shifted as he placed the apple to the side. Shen Liufei quickly summarized the current murder case the unit was investigating without missing any important details.

Considering Tao Jun and Xie Lanshan’s relationship, it would be natural for the old man’s first reaction to be disbelief. Not only that, but the old man should have been shocked and pained as if arrows pierced through his heart. Instead, Shen Liufei saw a peculiar, almost knowing kind of expression on Tao Jun’s face. Quickly, this unnatural expression was replaced by a more appropriate response. A forensic sketch artist like him had a keen eye for observing negative human emotions; he concluded that this fleeting reaction he had caught was abnormal.

Tao Jun asked, “Do you believe in him?”

Shen Liufei responded with, “Do you not?”

Tao Jun was speechless; after a moment of being taken aback, he let out a gentle sigh and said, “His dad left him when he was young, and he himself was stuck alone in that dreadful place for six years. The kid’s history is a bit complicated.”

“You’ve known him longer than me. You should know better than me the kind of person Xie Lanshan is.” Shen Liufei paused briefly, then said with a stern look, “I believe him.”

Tao Jun’s sharp gaze studied Shen Liufei for a while before he replied, “Mr. Shen, are you sure this trust is not a little biased?”

Paper cannot hold fire. Even without words, the passion burning inside him could not be hidden from his eyes. Old Tao might be a stubborn and traditional man, but he was still a sharp-minded cop with years of experience. He had already sniffed out some hints last time the entire unit came to pay him a visit. Shen Liufei refused to deny it, but he wasn’t in a position to fully confess their relationship. He could only look into the other’s eyes with his usual calm gaze.

“Ah, this is almost hard to believe. That kid never showed any signs of being interested in men since he was little; I still remember him carving up small wooden rabbits for Song Qilian all the time...” Tao Jun let out another sigh. Then a flash of determination appeared in his eyes as he struggled to get up from his bed. “All right, call Longyue over so we can go over this case again!”

Shen Liufei supported the old captain to stop him from getting too excited and said in a gentle voice, “I remember there was a time where I frequently consulted you about some unsolved rape-murder cases in the past.”

Tao Jun frowned as he attempted to dig through his memories and nodded. “That was many years ago, they’re all old cases.”

“Dog collar, sewn-up lips, and peeled off skin: I’m certain that I’ve heard about a case that used methods like these from you before.” Shen Liufei lifted an eyebrow and helped the old man sit upright before continuing, “Please, Captain Tao, I need you to dig through your memories for me. I have a feeling that this case has some sort of connection to the old cases in the past, and that the true culprit is someone else.”

“That was a case from at least twenty years ago... I don’t think I can remember all the details even if you ask...”

As Tao Jun squinted his eyes to recall it, Tao Longyue walked into the hospital room. He was slightly taken aback when he saw Shen Liufei, but immediately realized that his old man must know about Xie Lanshan’s situation now.

“If everything goes smoothly, a-Lan should be out of custody soon and proven innocent,” Tao Longyue announced to the two men in the room. “While Xie Lanshan was being detained and questioned, we discovered another young female corpse. The victim’s death was identical to Luo Xin, so it’s very possible that this is a serial-killer case by the same culprit.”

Shen Liufei didn’t get the answer he had hoped for from Tao Jun regarding the old case from twenty years ago, so he returned to his residence. He sat in his study and began searching for information on his laptop.

He had always been very interested in violent crimes against female victims, so like a stamp collector, his notebooks collected thousands of these cases over the years. Both in physical form and digital, the files he carried were merely the tip of the iceberg. The sources of these cases came from the police, lawyers, news, or other related professionals in the industry and were all organized neatly in his files. New cases were organized on his laptop, and older, more ambiguous cases were kept in physical form from newspaper cutouts. Photos of these murders were often gory and horrifying, and the stories behind them were all tragedies. The women, who had been raped, tortured, and beaten, mostly ended up dead. Some disappeared, others grew up to become criminals who brutally harmed the next victim in the same way they had suffered.

It wasn’t easy to face these horrific human tragedies. Even Shen Liufei had to pause briefly after opening up a new file to take in a deep breath of air.

After searching through these documents for some time, Shen Liufei took out a photograph kept inside a book on the side. He caressed the photo gently between his fingers—it was the same photo Xie Lanshan had seen.

The photo was of a young mother holding her infant son. Shen Liufei’s fingers gently brushed against the photograph with affection until he suddenly closed his laptop, shutting away the only light source in the room, and returned to darkness.

He remembered what Fu Yunxian had said to him: *There's something in your heart that will spread and rot.*

It was easy to say that it was an illness of the psyche, but Shen Liufei had no way to treat it or avoid it. He could only rely on venting it out on boxing stages time and time again until the injuries and sweat on his body evaporated the darkness inside.

Shen Liufei sat for a long while in the dark before he reopened his laptop and relied on his memories to search for an old case similar to this skin-peeling murder.

He found it before dawn struck inside a large old envelope.

It was an old case that had occurred twenty-five years ago around the Cangnan region. The culprit's modus operandi was the exact same as Luo Xin's case and spanned over four years, claiming the lives of eleven young women. Because the internet was still in its infancy back then, on top of the case being old and solved, most people didn't know about it—including the majority of investigators at the bureau.

Perhaps because of its age, the case wasn't recorded in much detail; the only thing he found was that the criminal suspect was never officially caught because he had committed suicide before the police found him.

Shen Liufei clicked open the Cangnan murder police report file and discovered that an old cop by the name of Zhu Mingwu used to be on the same investigation team as Tao Jun. Even though they hadn't worked together for long, he could almost be considered Tao Jun's mentor.

He arrived at the bureau in the afternoon and was told by Ding Li that Xie Lanshan had already left. "To where?"

"Dunno. Maybe he went home. Vice Chief Liu told him to go on a break and farm or something, that it's not appropriate for him to be involved with Luo Xin's case as a criminal suspect."

As if she knew that the two men's relationship was a little more than just colleagues, Ding Li smiled kindly and gave some extra words of apology for Shen Liufei to take back to Xie Lanshan, "Mr. Shen, please tell Big Bro Xie that it's not that we don't trust him, we still gotta do our work and Chief Liu is still watching us."

Shen Liufei gave Ding Li a look and then shifted his gaze to Xiao Liang and the rest of the crew hiding behind the young woman. He saw suspicion in their gazes. In all fairness, it wasn't abnormal for law enforcement officers to suspect all criminal suspects before they settled the case. These kinds of emotions came like a gust of wind but were hard to get rid of; like drawing thin silk from a cocoon, the dangerous thoughts were weapons that could strangle a person.

Xie Lanshan's attitude throughout the session had been uncooperative, considering his silence, which was unusual and, frankly, quite suspicious.

After being released from the bureau, Xie Lanshan circled around the local bars to search for Shen Liufei, but eventually went back home without spotting a trace of him.

The lights in the house were off when Shen Liufei walked in. It was the hour when the city lights glistened neon outside the window. Xie Lanshan's house was silent like an abandoned unit, but the sparks of light that shone through the glass spread on the gray flooring like dancing heartbeats.

There was no one in the living room or the bedroom. Shen Liufei followed the sounds of water flowing from the bathroom and opened the door.

He saw Xie Lanshan sitting on the floor with his head hanging down. Due to the dimming lights of dusk, the man's face was half covered in clean light while the other half was hidden within the dark shadows.

There were shards of glass everywhere in the bathroom, making it look as if the entire room was covered in mercury from afar. Shen Liufei only realized upon walking closer that Xie Lanshan had smashed the mirror on the wall. Also drenched, his hands were draped over his knees, shards of glass still stuck in his knuckles. Fresh blood dripped between his fingers.

The blood mixed in with the water that overflowed from the bathtub, tainting the entire floor a red that flowed by Shen Liufei's feet.

Shen Liufei stepped over the broken glass beside Xie Lanshan. The cop lifted his head and stared blankly at his guest with his bloodshot eyes.

Shen Liufei brushed his fingers gently through the man's hair and face, then asked softly, "Does it hurt?"

This question seemed to have pulled the man back from hell to the mortal world. Xie Lanshan suddenly resisted like a madman and rushed forward to grab onto Shen Liufei's neck. Shen Liufei dodged the attack, but the man was already standing in front of him. Unable to move, Shen Liufei had no choice but to throw a punch. This wasn't the first time he'd done so but it was the first time he put such force into his fist. Xie Lanshan was like a beast ready to kill and conquer. They brawled and rolled on the shard-filled and chilly floor until Shen Liufei was forced into the defensive—Xie Lanshan had pressed a piece of the broken mirror against the man's throat.

Their chests heaved up and down in sync. Xie Lanshan pressed his entire body onto Shen Liufei and stared at the man below him. There was blood at the corner of his lips; his eyes were buried in a dark shadow, but it almost looked as if he had an arrogant smile on his face.

"Do you still trust me now?" Xie Lanshan pressed his hand closer. The glass shard in his hand was now touching the skin at Shen Liufei's throat. There was a tattoo there, a dazzling lotus flower or the tail of a phoenix—the image moved on his skin under high pressure in a dangerous situation as if it was alive.

The glass forced Shen Liufei to lift his chin slightly. His cheekbones were also cut by the glass shards on the floor. Fresh blood rolled down his handsome face. Xie Lanshan leaned in closer and asked once again, lips almost touching the other, "Am I still worth your trust?"

Shen Liufei raised an arm and grabbed onto the hand with the glass shard, then pulled it toward his own throat—thankfully, Xie Lanshan pulled it back just in time. The shard still pierced into his skin, but the injury wasn't deep, only creating another cut.

"How else do you want me to prove it to you?" Shen Liufei's attitude remained unfazed, his gaze calm and deep, but his voice stern.

The aggression in Xie Lanshan's eyes finally vanished. He released the weapon in his hand, walked up to Shen Liufei, and carefully licked the wound. The warm blood lingered in his mouth for some time before he sat on Shen Liufei's lap and began pulling on the man's shirt. Xie Lanshan cupped his lover's face in his hands and pressed down for a kiss. Shen Liufei closed his eyes and allowed this aggressive action to continue until Xie Lanshan went for his lips. The deep kiss lured a part of Shen Liufei into him as he felt more alive than ever through the sharp pain and bone-wrenching passion.

After a short but passionate wet business in the bathroom, the two returned to the bedroom. Shen Liufei treated the wounds on Xie Lanshan's hands, carefully pulling out the shards that were stuck deep inside his flesh like mini flagpoles.

Law enforcement was a dangerous job; cops were used to injuries on duty and all had their own first-aid kits at home. Xie Lanshan sat on his bed while Shen Liufei knelt before him and helped treat his wounds.

Xie Lanshan couldn't help but chuckle as he saw the artist's serious face.

Shen Liufei looked up and asked, "What's so funny?"

Teasing the other had become a habit as Xie Lanshan lifted an eyebrow. "Having a trophy wife is the dream of all husbands in the world."

The wounds were wrapped up, but Shen Liufei squeezed Xie Lanshan's hand as if to punish him. The artist stood up and responded calmly, "Love yourself a little more. Your life doesn't just belong to you now."

Xie Lanshan had barely gotten any sleep during the last two days in custody. He could barely keep his eyes open right now and had no spare effort left to remember that he was still a criminal suspect. Xie Lanshan fell into Shen Liufei's embrace and buried his face in the man's waist, then wrapped an arm around him like a child.

"There was always someone who would remind me since I was little how a person should live and the power they should have," Xie Lanshan said as he touched the bullet hanging on his chest. He felt the corner of his eyes heating up and closed them. "It was my dad who told me this in the past, but now that person is you."

(v)

Even though Liu Yanbo refused to let him investigate this case, Xie Lanshan didn't plan on staying on the sidelines for long with his reputation on the line.

Zhu Mingwu was Tao Jun's mentor, so he would also be Xie Lanshan's mentor by proxy. When Tao Jun was doing criminal investigations with Zhu Mingwu, Xie Lanshan was still a hot-headed young man. Old officer Zhu had transferred twice across different municipalities during that time, so he must be an old man of at least sixty by now. Time was like a sharp blade that carved deep wrinkles on his aged face.

Zhu Mingwu had retired and moved to another city with his son already, living a rather carefree and peaceful life with his grandchildren. Xie Lanshan was on forced leave and Shen Liufei also requested a temporary leave of absence to pay the old man a visit, hoping to investigate this case before Tao Longyue and his team came over.

They left almost as soon as the plan was decided. Xie Lanshan walked out the door in the morning and rushed to the train station, waiting with an empty stomach at the waiting lounge in the station. He sat with his head tilted and leaning on Shen Liufei's shoulder. "Hey, cuz, I'm hungry."

Shen Liufei pretended to not understand and turned to look at Xie Lanshan. He reached a hand out and grabbed the other's chin. "Still? Did you know how much I fed you last night? You almost couldn't even drink it all and you're still hungry now?"

The man sure loved to say such scandalous things with a straight face. Xie Lanshan felt his face burning up and leaned his head in, using this opportunity while the station was still empty to steal a kiss from Shen Liufei. The kiss grew deeper as their tongues intertwined, their bodies glued onto each other. A few minutes later, they finally parted. Shen Liufei stood up and said, "Wait here, I'll buy you some food."

Xie Lanshan's mood was lifted and he couldn't help but praise how good of a wife he had in his mind. He leaned on the chair and closed his eyes to rest. That was when a small and pretty little girl walked up to him and called out shyly, "Big bro."

Xie Lanshan opened his eyes and knelt down to face the little girl at eye-level, smiling in response to her.

The little girl was holding a teddy bear almost half her size as she asked, "Another big bro asked me to ask you a question."

Xie Lanshan said, "What is it?"

"He wants me to ask you," the little girl clenched her teddy bear tighter, long eyelashes flickering as she said, "did you find the 'Apostle' yet?"

His heart sank into the bottom of an icy lake; Xie Lanshan's expression shifted almost instantly. He knew he wasn't hallucinating that night at the bar—Mu Kun really was back.

"What else did he say?"

"He said that he found it already and if you want to know who the 'Apostle' is, go find him."

Cold sweat rolled down his body. He suddenly heard muffled ticking sounds coming from the plush bear the little girl was holding, like some sort of countdown. Xie Lanshan had deactivated bombs before and was extra sensitive to these types of sounds.

He felt a vein on his forehead pop and quickly asked the little girl, “Who gave you the teddy bear you’re holding?”

The little girl held up the bear proudly in front of Xie Lanshan and gave a bright grin with a missing front tooth, then said gleefully, “It’s from that big brother that asked me to tell you all of that!”

Xie Lanshan once again felt the scathing malice reeking out of Mu Kun. The drug lord never cared much for life and would dare to shove a bomb in a little girl’s arms.

Even with a racing heart, Xie Lanshan tried to remain calm and spoke softly to the little girl, “Can you show me your teddy bear?”

“Okay, here you go.” The little girl had an innocent naiveness in her voice as she lifted the bear and handed it to the taller man in front of her.

Xie Lanshan immediately noticed the weight of the plush bear was off. He traced the seams of the bear and ripped through the fluffy exterior, then reached a hand inside to search the cotton within.

“My bear! My teddy bear!” The little girl cried out loud after seeing how such a handsome man treated the bear.

A young mother who was picking up her train tickets had just noticed her daughter ran off when she heard the little girl’s cries. Afraid her daughter would run into a bad person, she ran over and cried, “Nan Nan!”

“Stay away!” Xie Lanshan ordered harshly. The bomb was still ticking; there were less than ten seconds left on the countdown.

Some other pedestrians gathered beside him thinking it was a grown man bullying a child. Xie Lanshan howled once again, “There’s a bomb, all of you, back off!”

The men and women on the station platform began screaming and dispersing away from Xie Lanshan.

Xie Lanshan quickly analyzed his surroundings; the train station was crowded and there wasn’t enough time for him to deactivate the bomb. Thankfully, there was a bright blue explosion-proof tank not too far from him. Xie Lanshan rushed out and shoved the teddy bear carrying the bomb inside the tank, then closed the cover.

Even if the tank could decrease the impact of the explosion, the damage would still be inevitable. Xie Lanshan turned around to see the little girl stumbling over for her teddy bear, then rushed over to protect her. He covered her ears and shielded the child with his own body.

Yet after a few minutes, that expected explosion didn’t happen.

It wasn’t until the explosion tank was moved to a safe space and the armed police forces made their way to the scene, that they discovered it wasn’t a bomb inside the bear—it was just a timer.

The armed police were clearly unhappy with this charade and thought Xie Lanshan was purposely joking with the lives of the passengers.

Xie Lanshan could feel his soul leave his body as he hung his head in silence. Shen Liufei had to flash the man’s police badge to explain that they were investigating a

crime.

Seeing they were colleagues also fighting crime, the armed police let them go without another word. After confirming there were no other bombs threatening the safety of the station, the police left. Only the station security was baffled by this and asked, “Who could have made a prank like this? This is serious and can be prosecuted under the law!”

Finally, Xie Lanshan lifted his head and studied the security officers around him, then said coldly, “I want to check the surveillance.”

A row of ten screens lit up. They first pulled up the footage of the time when Xie Lanshan and the little girl were waiting on the platform. It wasn’t too difficult to investigate with everything laid out in front of him; Xie Lanshan’s gaze scanned the monitors sharply like lightning across the screens. He discovered a man wearing a hat, sunglasses, and high-collared coat who approached the little girl. The man handed her a plush bear and said something to her, then turned around and left.

The man carefully hid his appearance and didn’t show his face throughout the entire exchange, almost as if he knew where the blind spots of the security cameras were. He vanished and appeared like a ghost, and then quickly disappeared for good. Even if the man was supposed to be burnt to ashes, Xie Lanshan could still tell from a glance that the stranger was Mu Kun.

This whole charade was a setup Mu Kun was using to tease him. The man knew Xie Lanshan too well; he knew how the young cop would react in this situation. He was meticulous, as if he also predicted the chill that would run down the spine, the cold sweat that would roll down Xie Lanshan.

Six years of being undercover was not an experience he wanted to look back on. The horror that Mu Kun represented was a feeling that only grew heavier by the day, with no signs of ever vanishing. Xie Lanshan felt disgusted, like he had been violated; he pointed at the paused screen and said to the train security guards beside him, “Go catch this guy, he’s an extremely dangerous drug lord.”

Despite being under the same law enforcement system, Xie Lanshan wasn’t a direct boss of these people. Security felt they had already given him leeway by not pestering him about a false alarm in public; they hadn’t imagined the man would dare order them around now. A young and inexperienced security guard was annoyed at this attitude and said, “You’re clearly hampering our everyday work now. We can’t go arrest someone just because they gave a child a teddy bear, besides, you were the one that thought it was a bomb—”

A strange spark of fire arose within Xie Lanshan. He turned around and grabbed the guard’s collar and pushed the young man to the wall.

The guard gasped; the man was at least an entire head taller than him, and though his face was almost unbelievably handsome his eyes were extremely terrifying. He looked nothing like a cop.

The older security guard also jumped and started yelling. Xie Lanshan didn't move or speak, only stared coldly at the young man before him, his gaze deep like a black pond.

Shen Liufei approached him from behind, wrapped an arm around his neck, and pulled the man back toward him. The artist pressed his lips beside the cop's ear and said in a deep, alluring voice, "Calm down, Xie Lanshan."

Xie Lanshan loosened his grip immediately. He admitted he was too aggressive, but for some reason, he wasn't able to control himself at that moment.

Only the man behind him could bring him peace of mind.

Because of the false alarm bomb incident, the bullet train station automatically entered anti-terrorism mode and delayed numerous trains. By the time Xie Lanshan returned to his platform, all the passengers who had been evacuated earlier returned, annoyance written across their faces. The evacuation order had lasted a whole day, making them feel as if they had wasted all that time for nothing.

The public announcement loomed above their heads, explaining that it was a mistake caused by the police during an investigation, but the threat had been removed.

The little girl in the dress was still there, waving vigorously when she saw Xie Lanshan come back as if jumping for joy. This man was handsome and strong; even though she was too young to understand words such as "anti-terrorism" and "bomb threat," she knew that his act of protecting her under his body was a heroic move that was the stuff of movies. The young mother holding her daughter had a different opinion. She gave Xie Lanshan an eye roll and mumbled under her breath, "Cops these days sure lack discipline, who makes a scene over a trivial matter..."

Xie Lanshan was tired and didn't want to explain himself. Shen Liufei handed hot coffee to him. Xie Lanshan held the cup; the tips of his long fingers touched the rim as he stood in silence.

He felt as if he was losing control of himself, standing by the edge of a cliff that led down to the depths of the abyss. He was only a step away from completely falling.

He felt that he was straying further and further away from being a "good cop."

(vi)

They finally got on the train at 8 P.M. Xie Lanshan sat in a window seat, speaking very little throughout the whole trip. He spent most of his time looking out the window in silence, resting his forehead on his hand while he fell into a daze.

He fell asleep almost immediately. He dreamed of the handsome old Xie.

Xie Lanshan had always been closer to his father since he was young. Gao Zhuyin was born into a wealthy family and had been spoiled since childhood, so she had spent money quite handsomely after marriage to live a lavish life.

While Gao Zhuyin admired her husband's courage, she was also not quite happy with such a dangerous career and low-income job. Old Xie never fought his wife, and

only took his son out to play basketball as stress relief. Xie Lanshan remembered how his father took him for a game of basketball with the Tao family right before a mission. Old Xie's foot was like a springboard that made slam-dunking easy, and Xie Lanshan was also quite skilled at basketball himself; the father-and-son duo were very much in sync during the game. The little round Tao Longyue at the time was ready to cry after defeat. Who could have known that old Xie would never return from a mission again.

Then Gao Zhuyin finally saw the cruelty of the world, and she went mad.

In the reflection of the dark window at night, Shen Liufei saw a quiet face wet with tears. The trails were thin, but they ran down as if burning a trail in his heart that stung with every heartbeat. He looked at Xie Lanshan briefly before he at long last called out gently, "Xie Lanshan."

The young cop always kept his weaknesses hidden, only ever allowing himself to miss his father in his dreams. He woke from his short dream and rubbed his eyes, then pulled off the bullet necklace from his neck. He placed that carefully in the palm of his hand and stared at it.

Shen Liufei said, "You've been acting quite odd today. Does it have something to do with your father?"

Xie Lanshan answered honestly after taking in a quick breath of air, "When I was still undercover in the Golden Triangle, Mu Kun once told me that a traitor in the police department known as the 'Apostle' killed my dad. And that person was my dad's closest comrade."

"And he didn't tell you who it was?" Shen Liufei asked.

"Not even Mu Kun knew who he was. The Apostle was planted into the police by his dad, and he never found out because of how suddenly his father died." Xie Lanshan paused slightly, frowned, and then continued, "I have someone on my suspect list."

"You mean Liu Yanbo?"

"There are only a handful of people alive now who could be considered a 'close comrade' to old Xie back then. Those who had sacrificed in the line of duty couldn't have been the culprit, and those who quit the industry have long since left; the only one who was still alive and lived a better life after the mission was Vice Chief Liu." Xie Lanshan explained that this wasn't a baseless guess, that Liu Yanbo's harsh and discriminatory attitude toward him was proof itself, and he had also witnessed the old man take bribes from others. "That painting in his house may be fake, but it's true that he still accepted the gift."

There was another layer of meaning beneath Xie Lanshan's anxiety, a line he didn't tell Shen Liufei: He felt that if he didn't discover who the Apostle was for his old man, he would fail as his son.

Of course, Shen Liufei had some words he didn't tell Xie Lanshan as well: Perhaps because the man was the center of this event himself and couldn't see the bigger

picture, the artist felt Tao Jun was more suspicious than the consistently hostile Liu Yanbo.

By the time they arrived at their destination, it was already near midnight. The small town was nowhere as robust as Hanhai, so the two men settled in a motel near the station for the night. The next morning, they followed the address Tao Jun gave them to pay Zhu Mingwu a visit.

Old officer Zhu Mingwu looked much older in age, more so than even Tao Jun, but he also looked tougher and more hard-boiled. The old man was in good spirits. He had expected the visitors and prepared all the files on the old case after receiving a courtesy call from Tao Jun.

Very few files remained of the horrifying Cangnan rape-murder case. Shen Liufei and Xie Lanshan studied the profile of the culprit; he was a surgeon by the name of Kong Xiangping. The man had once offered his services to rural and poorer neighborhoods in the past, so even if he was still alive today, he would have already been long retired. The black-and-white ID had degraded with age, immortalizing the face of the devil. Just from his appearance, it was impossible to imagine that such a clean and sophisticated-looking man was actually a twisted demon who had raped and killed eleven young women.

Among the victims, the oldest was twenty-eight years old while the youngest was only eight.

The old officer seemed to have read their expressions and shook his head. “This man’s a demon, a horrible monster. He would lure innocent girls into his house and lock them in his basement to torture and use them as sex toys. If anyone tried to fight back or attempted to flee, he would sew their mouths shut with fabric needles and peel their skin off with his surgery knife. After torturing them to death, he would toss the corpse into the wild and search for his next victim. Because he was a volunteer medic in a rural town, he was very respected in the daytime by the residents in the village. For a very long time, nobody suspected him to be the culprit.”

Shen Liufei continued to look through the file and asked, after turning a few pages, “If Kong Xiangping had already committed suicide by the time the police found him, where did all these hidden details about his crimes come from?”

“We saved a little girl at the time, who was also the only survivor of this horrific serial-killer case.” The old cop sighed. “The truth is, we discovered over twelve young women’s DNA in that basement. There were also massive amounts of feminine products, dolls, lipsticks, handkerchiefs, and more—there were even some infant supplies. This demon must have killed far more than eleven girls, but only eleven of their corpses were found.”

Shen Liufei and Xie Lanshan exchanged a glance, their expressions grave at how horrific and twisted this culprit was.

Xie Lanshan quickly scanned the files and discovered that the surviving girl's profile was very simple, with only one name on file that was clearly an alias: Xiao Man. He remarked in surprise, "This survivor could be the key to breaking this case today, was her information not recorded on file?"

The old man shook his head and said, "The little girl was only eleven when she was saved. The cops involved in the case back then didn't want this child to live under the shadow of such a traumatic experience for the rest of her life, so they did their best to hide her from mass media and didn't record too much of her personal information."

Shen Liufei pondered a little before asking the old officer, "What do you still remember about this little girl?"

The old man squinted as if he was reminiscing a blurry dream. After a long while, he finally returned to reality and said, "I remember when they saved that little girl from the basement, she was already on her last breath. She lay on my shoulder, and was clearly tired. The little girl seemed to be of mixed ethnicity. Her features were very pretty and delicate, even at the age of eleven, and she looked almost prettier than a doll..."

Over twenty years later, a time so far away from this old man's life, he could still clearly remember the scene of how he saved this young girl from the hands of the devil. He continued on as if he was in a daze and repeated, "She wore a beautiful red dress..."

Knowing that Xiao Man had once been hospitalized in the municipal hospital, Shen Liufei bid the old man farewell and prepared to take his leave. Just before he stepped out of the door, the artist suddenly turned back and asked, "Do you happen to remember anything about your old student Tao Jun?"

The old man squinted once again and said, "He's reliable, hardworking, and very skilled. I know he later switched to the drug enforcement department and made quite a name there."

"What kind of person is he aside from work?"

Xie Lanshan didn't understand what had prompted Shen Liufei's sudden questions.

The old man pondered once again, which took up another long while before he finally said, "There's an unexplainable stubbornness in him. I always had a strange feeling that he would one day do something that could harm both himself and the people around him."

The Red Dress

Another corpse was discovered with a time of death estimated to be earlier than the previous two victims. Three young women had died within a short period of time, all in similar and horrifying ways: a dog collar on their necks, their mouths slit open and sewn back up. They had been skinned in different parts of their bodies, leaving them bloody messes.

This serial killer stirred up a storm in the city as people now lived in fear while the violent crimes unit felt an unprecedented pressure on their shoulders. Tao Longyue had been clocking out late almost every day; outside he was stuck in a loop of investigations, and inside in meetings within the bureau. He'd barely scraped some time together on his own birthday to invite Su Mansheng out for a dinner date.

They still went to the French restaurant that Doctor Su liked at the same seat they both preferred by the bookshelf. Tao Longyue kindly pulled out the chair for Su Mansheng and suddenly recalled the day he called his teammates out for a party, then asked, "I went to call you over the day we went out to the bar, how come you didn't pick up your phone?"

Su Mansheng seemed to not have much of an appetite, her expression was also a little cloudy. She closed the menu after flipping through half-heartedly, then responded lightly with her head down, her eyes staring at the piece of lemon in her water, "I was reading, so I had my phone off."

"I wanted to pick you up at your house, but I didn't see the lights on." There wasn't anything suspicious about the exchange; a forensic scientist was an around-the-clock job. Su Mansheng often spent her free time reading books and attending seminars or lectures. However, he had noticed that the doctor's attitude had grown distant ever since she accepted his proposal. Aside from work, it was virtually impossible to contact her. This made the young captain feel as if he was involved in a long-distance relationship. He began to doubt himself as the days went by, unsure where he had failed her.

"Maybe I was tired from reading." Su Mansheng lifted her eyes to look at him and then smoothly responded, "I fell asleep."

Tao Longyue didn't pursue the question further and called the waiter to place their orders. Both of them got the same special steak combo today; Tao Longyue asked for it medium-well while Su Mansheng had her meat a little rarer.

By the time their orders were ready, the French chef who was acquainted with Su Mansheng showed up again. He passionately asked for hugs and intimate exchanges, to which Su Mansheng responded amicably and welcomingly.

The Frenchman, Le Goff, was clearly in love with Su Mansheng. Ever since she had confirmed her relationship with Tao Longyue, the chef would always shoot cold glances at the captain as if he was eyeing a mortal enemy. Le Goff shook his head right in front of Tao Longyue and placed his big hand around Su Mansheng's shoulders. He spoke in his accented Chinese to her, "If I'd known you weren't into women, I would have pursued you as I would chase after the sun..."

Maintaining his dignity and class, young Captain Tao couldn't respond with a direct eye roll and instead only cursed in his head: *Great Chef Le Goff my ass, more like a silly Le Goof.*

Though the man had a point. Doctor Su was cold and aloof; her demeanor and attitude toward men had always been quite intimidating. In contrast, she was excessively kind and caring toward women around her to the point even Xie Lanshan had assumed she was gay.

"I will do anything to earn a smile from you..." Chef Le Goff openly flirted with her right in front of Captain Tao, holding Su Mansheng's hands as he gazed at her affectionately.

Tao Longyue was getting tired of this and asserted his dominance. He stood up and wrapped his arm around Su Mansheng, then said with a grin, "Chef Le Goff, I think it's time that you return to the kitchen. I need to discuss some details about our marriage with my girlfriend."

After a heavy hit to his heart, the chef reluctantly returned to the kitchen—finally.

Su Mansheng sat back down, her expression cold as she said, "That was a little petty of you, Tao."

The appetizers came out first: fresh boiled eggs and salad with goose liver. Tao Longyue was three years younger than Su Mansheng, and the captain had always felt a little intimidated before her. Now that he'd seen she had no intention to chitchat, he no longer dared to upset her more and ate silently with his head down.

The two ate quietly for a while until Su Mansheng said, "Where's Xie Lanshan? Is he cleared from this case now?"

Tao Longyue nodded and said, "We've already proven that it's a serial murder by the same culprit. By the time we discovered the second victim, it was impossible for Xie Lanshan to have committed the crime."

Su Mansheng had no interest in discussing their marriage but had her attention all on this serial-killer case. She asked, "So, any breakthroughs with

the investigation so far?"

Tao Longyue shook his head and responded, "From the looks of it now, it seems like a series of indiscriminate murders. The victims are unacquainted with each other and they share nothing in common, so it's much more difficult for us to lock in on a suspects list."

The steak arrived. Su Mansheng held up a steak knife in her hands and gave Tao Longyue a smile. "Should I give you some advice?"

The atmosphere between them had clearly eased, and Tao Longyue didn't hesitate to redon his fanboy attitude and said, "I'd love to hear from the expert."

"The edges of the skin stripped off the victims are very clean with even thickness, so the culprit must be a professional."

"A professional? Like a doctor?" Tao Longyue had considered this possibility, but it was difficult to narrow in on one person with so many doctors in Hanhai.

"Or a chef," Su Mansheng suggested in a jesting tone. She pulled Tao Longyue's steak over and kindly helped him cut the meat into small pieces, then said, "The second autopsy revealed that there was massive bleeding from the private areas on the three victims. There were no DNA samples we could find from their lower bodies, but combining this with the level of damage discovered to their flesh, it's highly possible that these injuries were caused by something hard and similar to a wooden rod..."

"In these circumstances... the culprit could be an adult man with some sort of disability." Tao Longyue further analyzed the situation and then came to an even more surprising hypothesis, "Or the culprit could be a woman!"

"It would be very difficult for one woman to commit murder, hide the body, and then toss it all in one go." Su Mansheng had finished cutting Tao Longyue's steak and went back to cutting her own as she said, "The culprit is clearly very experienced. It would be difficult for an average doctor to complete everything so meticulously. The skin that was cut off from the victims' bodies preserved the muscle tissues; you can see the veins and even some of the organs through the cut..."

The steak was too rare. One slice through the meat released red juice on the plate like fresh blood. Tao Longyue looked at how Su Mansheng discussed the culprit's method of peeling skin nonchalantly as she cut the steak, feeling his stomach churn slightly in disgust.

They took a stroll in the shopping mall after dinner, though they didn't shop. It had been some time since he'd seen his girlfriend. Young Captain Tao felt relaxed and at peace for the first time in a long while and didn't want to toss himself back into the horrifying and cruel serial-killer case so soon.

They passed by the female clothing section and saw a boutique displaying a beautiful, long, red dress by the window. Su Mansheng stopped and stared at the dress.

As an interracial woman, Su Mansheng always had a dazzling aura around her. If she wasn't a forensic scientist, she could have easily become an actress or model. However, she didn't seem to be interested in fame or attention, and very rarely wore bright colors outside of work. Tao Longyue pondered briefly and decided that he could ask his fiancée to dress in this beautiful red gown for the annual New Year's party the municipal bureau hosted. Imagining how his future wife would stun everyone with her beauty at the party, he could already feel himself beaming with pride.

Captain Tao said, "Do you like it? I can buy it for you."

But Su Mansheng didn't answer him. Her gaze was still fixed on this red dress. A strange expression appeared on her face as the corners of her lips curled into something that wasn't a smile.

Tao Longyue looked at the profile of the doctor for a moment and suddenly felt something eerie grab his heartstrings. Yet as soon as he tried to figure out what it was, Su Mansheng already retracted her gaze and turned her head back to him in her usual queenly demeanor. "No need, let's go."

The date ended early and Tao Longyue drove Su Mansheng back home. In order to solve the problem of limited parking, the parking structure around the shopping mall had been working on its expansion recently. It first took down a small park around the neighborhood, which was now surrounded by a wired fence all around.

Just as Su Mansheng got in the car, a horrifying cry for help rang out from the dirt field behind the fence, "Help me, help—"

The cry was quickly cut off as if the person had been hurt, and likely devastatingly so. Before Su Mansheng could call out to him, Tao Longyue already rushed out as fast as he could toward the source of the sound. He then quickly turned back as soon as he stepped out and pressed a hand to stop Su Mansheng from getting out of the car. "Stay in the car and wait for me. Be careful!"

The former park was already in shambles, as construction had begun. There were no stars in the sky, no lights on the grounds, but even through the wired fence a few meters ahead, Tao Longyue could still see a man violently beating a young woman. The man was tall and dressed in black, his face covered in a mask. The young woman had long black hair and fair skin. She dressed only in a simple red dress on this cold winter night with a black dog collar around her neck.

The man attempted to wrap the dog leash around the woman's face and closed her mouth shut. The girl felt death approaching and desperately

struggled out of the man's grip, somehow managing to knock the mask off in the process.

The man quickly picked up his mask to cover his exposed face. The girl attempted to flee but was quickly pulled back by the leash around her neck. He dragged her forward as if he was dragging cattle. She couldn't win in strength; she dragged a menacing trail along the muddy ground.

The fence was about two meters tall. Tao Longyue jumped from the ground and pulled himself over the fence as fast as he could. He glimpsed the man's profile and saw that the culprit was wearing a mask.

Noticing that someone arrived to save the girl, the man in black immediately tossed his victim aside and ran for his life. Tao Longyue chased after him until he reached the girl. He pulled out the chain covering her mouth, noticing that aside from her teary face, she was alive and not severely injured. He then quickly got up and continued to chase after the man in black.

The suspect ran fast, but he was clearly not an expert. He attempted to jump over the fence but was caught off balance as soon as he landed and rolled on the ground for a good meter out. Tao Longyue pursued closely, climbed swiftly to the top of the fence, and then jumped down toward the suspect below, landing right on the man.

Fists shot out faster than words; Tao Longyue landed a heavy blow on the suspect without a greeting as soon as he took control. The man in black struggled as he suffered the blows, then grabbed a fistful of sand from his side and hurled it toward Tao Longyue's eyes. Captain Tao turned his head and dodged the blow swiftly; the man on the ground took this opportunity to crawl back up. As soon as he lifted his head, he noticed Tao Longyue's face not too far away from him.

With the help of ghostly white light, Tao Longyue saw it clearly. The man wore a human-skin mask sewn together like a quilt, only exposing a pair of dark eyes like a horrible alligator peeking out from a deep mire.

Despite solving many gory and horrific cases, Tao Longyue had never seen such a terrifying scene and felt his heart jump as he laid eyes on the mask. The man seemed to have expected this reaction and gave a rough and deep laugh behind the mask. He took this brief opening and launched an attack at Tao Longyue.

Even if the man in black was tall and strong, he was still no match for young Captain Tao in terms of physical combat and quickly fell to the defensive. He took steps back and quickly found his wrist caught in a tight grip. Tao Longyue didn't hesitate and pressed harder until he dislocated the man's wrist.

"Ah!" Su Mansheng also arrived at this point and saw the two men caught in a violent brawl. She then suddenly screamed.

The suspect was already one step away from being caught, but Su Mansheng's sudden shriek distracted Tao Longyue. His slightly loosened grip was a fatal mistake. The captain didn't expect the suspect to react suddenly like a fish back in the water; he reached into his sleeves and pulled out a surgical knife, then stabbed Tao Longyue.

"Watch out!"

But Su Mansheng's cry was too late. The knife had already pierced the left side of Tao Longyue's abdomen. Tao Longyue didn't feel pain as the cold blade dug into his boiling flesh, only dazed.

Injuries already covered the man in black. As if he was afraid more cops would come, he sprinted away.

Tao Longyue suddenly bent forward and panted heavily, keeping a hand over his injury. Within seconds, his face was already deathly pale, sweat covering his forehead. Su Mansheng rushed over to help him up, then asked, concerned, "Are you all right?"

"Didn't I tell you... to stay where you were at..." Tao Longyue pressed a hand on his injury, but fresh blood continued to stream between his fingers. He wasn't trying to scold her but felt frustrated as he cursed, "Dammit, I was so close... so close to catching him..."

(ii)

This serial-killer case was causing unrest among the citizens as rumors began surfacing on the internet. The red-ice case from earlier was also an important case appointed by the national government, so the provincial branch began sending out extra resources to support the investigations. They founded a special investigation unit and even enlisted the help of other members from the Blue Foxes in the hopes of solving the serious cases as soon as possible.

Tang Qinglan knew that Xie Lanshan had his eyes on her. It was a time of turbulence and she had been lying low; her company in name and all-female nightclub were still in business with an added investment to a certain project.

It was Liu Mingfang's project.

Tang Qinglan invited the man into her office, but neither of them talked about work and only chatted aimlessly in the room. Liu Mingfang wanted to talk business, but this rumored Miss T did not seem to trust his plans.

"I've already done what you guys asked and searched through my dad's files about the drug-enforcement cases. I can't help anymore..."

He had placed his hopes on the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* to save his business but ended up becoming a suspect in Li Guochang's case. His reputation in the industry had deteriorated and he had no more connections outside; without Tang Qinglan's financial support, his company would have

gone bankrupt already. Liu Mingfang might not be a cop, but he came from a family of policemen and had a good guess what Tang Qinglan's real business was. Of course, the man was too cowardly to involve himself with the drug trade and only wished for an opportunity to get out of this pit.

Yet a privileged rich child raised under shelter did not know the consequences of mingling with dangerous businesses and people. The playing field was all but a façade that hid the true depth of the swamp, and by the time he realized it, he was already too deep in.

"I know you're not a cop, so stop worrying over nothing." Miss T smiled back. "I'll just ask you to do one more thing for me and install an app on your dad's phone—"

"No, no, no, I swear that wouldn't be a joke if he finds out," Liu Mingfang refused. He could tell the woman wanted to install a hacking device on his father's cell phone to steal intel and quickly waved his hand in horror. "Stealing info from my dad's out of the question now! He almost got me last time I was searching through his files in his study! Sure, the old man's a little easy when it comes to his hobbies and art, but he always takes his job seriously. If I even try to mention something about a bug at home, I swear I'm going to get a harsh scolding from him. He's a former drug-enforcement officer with awards and honors behind him. When I say he has sharp senses in his field, it isn't a joke..."

Tang Qinglan rested her face on her hand and leaned in toward Liu Mingfang. Her eyebrows were thin lines of ink, her mouth a touch of red. She lifted an eyebrow and pressed her lips together as if she was blowing a kiss and said, "I know, he's one of the famous Flaming Triangles from the antidrug forces.'"

The woman had very full lips, a flat nose, and eyes that were further apart than most people. She wasn't someone Chinese culture would traditionally consider a beauty, but there was something unique about the way she looked that was still alluring and captivating. As if dancing to the song of the siren, Liu Mingfang knew he couldn't step out now because he had also fallen under the charms of this woman.

His thoughts quickly returned as he picked out something strange in those words and said, "Is that a well-known title? Where did you hear that from?"

Drug-enforcement units tended to work away from the spotlight, and the title was from cases that were over twenty years old. It was almost impossible for internal nicknames and jokes to be spread out to the public.

Tang Qinglan gave a chuckle and responded vaguely, "From your father's comrade. I'm very familiar with their history in the unit."

"My dad's comrade... who?" Liu Mingfang desperately tried to decipher the meaning behind those words.

“But he’s useless now.” Miss T lifted the corner of her lips and said, “If we don’t use your dad... then why don’t we have you do the work instead?”

“Me? I’m not a cop, I don’t have any internal intel—”

Someone knocked on the office door from the outside. Before anyone inside could invite them in, the door opened on its own. A delicate face with heavy makeup peeked in from outside—she was Liu Mingfang’s personal secretary, Xia Hong.

She was indeed quite a personal secretary to him. Liu Mingfang had desperately pursued Song Qilian in the past because he fell for the woman’s refreshing and clean appearance, but drinking clear water got boring after a while. That was why he’d had affairs even after marriage, mostly with women who dressed more lavishly.

Xia Hong had slept with her boss before and believed he had her back, so she often acted boldly and a little out of line during work. She didn’t explain whether she was listening in on their conversation outside the door, and instead turned to remind Liu Mingfang that they had dinner plans with Chief Wong later and needed to leave soon.

Liu Mingfang’s nasty habit picked up again; he complained that Xia Hong looked too proper and businesslike, unlike Miss T, who had her own style despite looking less like a professional. It was one thing to be undisciplined in the workspace, but Xia Hong was someone who was also extremely superstitious and into the occult. She was well-versed in various fortune-telling techniques and often went on about her spiritual findings.

Compared to Tang Qinglan, Liu Mingfang grew more annoyed at Xia Hong and waved her off in annoyance. “All right, you can wait outside for now.”

Nothing is more venomous than the judging gaze between women. Xia Hong studied Tang Qinglan from top to bottom and grew more confident in herself. Miss T dressed in a men’s black jacket and objectively looked less appealing. Of course, Miss T couldn’t compare to Xia Hong in looks, but the female CEO had an unexplainable sense of authority that Xia Hong couldn’t compete with. The secretary stomped away with sourness in her mouth.

“We’re not done talking, yet you’re leaving already?” Tang Qinglan got up and sat right on Liu Mingfang’s lap. She wrapped her arm around his neck and pressed her lips to leave a mark on his shirt collar.

“I’m trying to get back together with my wife, I can’t do these things anymore...” Liu Mingfang could feel his heart race, and he was almost unable to control himself.

“All right, I won’t keep you here if you have plans after this.” Tang Qinglan escorted him out without troubling him further. She gave Liu Mingfang another playful wink before saying, “How about this: I’ll wait for you tonight at the club.”

Liu Mingfang had an eventful night. After being offered drink after drink by many pretty ladies in the club, he let his intoxicated self fall into the gentle embrace of Miss T.

As soon as he opened his eyes and reached an arm out to touch the woman sleeping next to him, he felt something wet beneath his fingers.

The man sat up on the bed in shock and saw Xia Hong's bloody corpse lying beside him. She was already cold and had no heartbeat.

"W-what's going on? Weren't you the one sleeping with me last night?!" Liu Mingfang was panicking as he stared at his hand covered in blood, then turned to Tang Qinglan, who had just walked into the room.

"Turn off the camera." Tang Qinglan flashed Liu Mingfang a smile after giving her subordinates an order. "Should I call the cops right now or help you get rid of this body?"

"G-get rid of it? How?" After the distraction of alcohol wore off, Liu Mingfang finally realized he had walked right into the woman's trap. However, he also realized that there was no way for him to walk out of this with his hands clean anymore.

"How do you hide a body? You just need to hide it in a *pile* of dead bodies." The woman's usual enchanting expression grew cold and distant as she said in a low voice, "But I won't help you without conditions. I need you to plant some spies for me inside the municipal bureau."

"I can't do it, I told you, I'm not a cop..." Liu Mingfang was ready to cry, and he was unable to finish his sentence.

"You coward, of course I'm not asking you to be the spy!" Miss T scolded him harshly. The next moment, her usual playful and coquettish expression returned as the tone of her voice audibly lifted. She dragged out the last syllable as if she was singing and said playfully, "You only need to place the bait."

(iii)

After bidding Zhu Mingwu farewell, Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei continued their investigation, using the old man's intel at the provincial hospital that had saved Xiao Man. It had been over twenty years and neither was sure if they could still find any useful evidence. They were quite fortunate. The nurse that had handled the girl's case back then was now the head of her department and still remembered the case clearly.

The nurse said that the harassment and beating Xiao Man went through while she was kidnapped left severe physical and mental scars. The little girl was psychologically worn down by the time she was saved and suffered extreme PTSD. Unable to obtain more information from her witness account,

the hospital contacted a local orphanage and law office for abuse after treating her physical wounds to enroll her in an all-female convent.

Most children saved from such horrific kidnapping and sexual abuse were returned to their parents, but if the hospital could not contact any parent or legal guardian, they would normally be placed in the care of a local orphanage. This news shocked Xie Lanshan, who said, “Why a convent?”

“That church also serves the community in certain ways, and the headmaster was the kindest and most benevolent person I’ve known,” the nurse said with a sigh. “That poor little girl, not only was she violated at such a young age, she also had to see other innocent girls like her get killed one after another. I thought that after facing the most extreme pain and evil, perhaps the only salvation for her could be found in faith and spirituality.”

As one of the biggest cities at the center of three provinces, Cangnan had been developing rapidly over the last few years. The work to upgrade the governing scale of the city had been pushed forward to manage the developments. The convent was on the other side of the city, near a neighboring province. In order to save on time, Xie Lanshan gave the headmaster a call right before they left the hospital to explain their visit.

Early winter was cloudy with harsh winds. They called a cab and rushed toward their destination, passing through the robust and crowded newly developed city. Their racing hearts finally settled by the time they arrived at the convent.

The convent was a private historical monument built over a hundred years ago by a visiting Catholic priest, and not usually open to the public. Beautiful trees surrounded the marbled white walls of the chapel on all sides, like a fortress in the woods. There was a small stream of water outside with some fish still swimming in this weather. The two men walked over the stone-paved walkway to the front gate of the convent and were greeted by the writing hanging outside the door:

His holy light brings salvation to man.

Xie Lanshan stared at the sign silently, praising the tranquil and isolated location of this convent. It was truly the ideal place to forget the temptations of the mortal world.

Seeing that the headmaster was taking a leave with two sisters, Xie Lanshan explained to the headmaster he was here for an investigation and to find out where Xiao Man was today.

The old headmaster was a woman nearing her sixties with an amicable face but she also had uncontested authority in the convent. She took the two men on a tour of the community, including the school, and explained Xiao Man’s life when the girl had lived here. She said, “Xiao Man found her inner peace and faith here; by the time she was ready to leave the convent, she had already

healed the wounds in her heart. I don't think there's a need to disturb her newfound peaceful life."

Shen Liufei explained, "A case very similar to what happened back then recently occurred. We must find some useful evidence from her past experiences to prevent more victims like her from falling prey to the criminal."

Seemingly uninterested in helping the police, the headmaster walked toward a little girl sitting outside the chapel as they conversed. The girl looked to be about twelve to thirteen years of age. She held a drawing board and pencil in her hands, and all of her attention was on the drawing. She didn't speak and looked mature for her age, as if her only entertainment was to sit outside the chapel and draw quietly by herself.

According to Shen Liufei, the girl had some talent.

The headmaster communicated with her using sign language and brushed her hand gently against the girl's hair.

The headmaster walked back to the two guests and sighed, "This child is quite unfortunate as well. She came down with a severe illness almost as soon as she was born and became deaf, then her family tossed her aside."

Xie Lanshan's attention wasn't on the little girl and he continued to steer the conversation back to Xiao Man. "We don't have a clue who the culprit might be, nor whether this is an indiscriminate serial murder or something with a hidden motive. Whether or not we can solve the case in a timely manner is dependent on our investigation."

"All you guys have been talking about is solving the case. Have you not considered the mental trauma it could cause her if we bring this up again?" The headmaster was insistent on not revealing any private information. She said that the girl was well now; she didn't know where Xiao Man was living, but she also refused to remind the girl of the traumatic experience.

"How do you know she's doing well?" Xie Lanshan caught the loophole in her words and continued to question her like an unstoppable force. "Has she been keeping in contact with you? Does she contact you regularly? Has she come by to visit you lately? Within the last two months, or perhaps three months? She should be about thirty-two now. Is she married yet? Does she have a child?"

This kind of aggressive questioning was another way of getting answers. Xie Lanshan's expression was stern and his gaze a little sharp. He stared at the headmaster's face without looking away. In the eyes of a professional investigator like him, any sign of lying could be detected with the slightest shift in expression, and answers could easily be found in subconscious body language.

It didn't take long for Xie Lanshan to find his answer. He softened the tone of his voice and said, "She's paid a visit to you recently, hasn't she?"

The headmaster was no match against him and could only say, "She's going to get married soon. Can you please leave this poor girl alone and let her live a fulfilling life with her family?"

Xie Lanshan still tried to explain, "I really don't want to disturb her, but the culprit is still free."

The headmaster let out another long sigh, then finally said after a long silence, "Is there a law out there that says witnesses can refuse to testify?"

"The Criminal Procedure Laws say that anyone who has knowledge about a case has an obligation to testify before the law." Xie Lanshan wasn't afraid to offend anyone under the eyes of heaven, but he was truthful out of sincere respect for this old woman who had dedicated her life to her beliefs. "Of course, there are no legal repercussions or consequences if you refuse the obligation. Therefore, the choice is still yours."

"Then I've already made my decision. I will not speak another word." Her long robe danced gently in the wind as the headmaster turned to make her leave, saying that she still had business to take care of, and left the convent.

A young nun offered to escort the guests out, at which time Xie Lanshan had the idea to question a different person and asked if she had seen Xiao Man before.

"I've never heard our headmaster mention anyone by the name of Xiao Man," she said. It was impossible to tell whether she truly didn't know or if she had been told to not reveal any information, but the young nun shook her head and said, "I can show you two around the convent a little more, but I really don't know any more about this person."

She may have been a nun, but Xie Lanshan knew he could still charm a young woman. He confidently flaunted himself and attempted to knock some intel from the young nun but was stopped by Shen Liufei's judging eye.

Shen Liufei retracted his gaze from the little girl drawing outside and said to the nun courteously, "Sure, let's tour the other side."

The nun led the way a few steps ahead of them. Xie Lanshan leaned his head toward Shen Liufei and whispered, "What a pain."

Their lead had abruptly reached a dead end. Shen Liufei pressed his eyebrows together and once again turned to the mute and deaf little girl.

"What 'citizen's obligation'? Talking to these people is practically useless," Xie Lanshan complained in a whisper out of fear that the nun would overhear them. Running into obstacles during an investigation wasn't uncommon, but they couldn't simply arrest anyone who didn't cooperate. Xie Lanshan was confident he could set traps and outsmart people who were sly and tricky, but he didn't know how to deal with those who were honest and righteous like the

headmaster.

As if he didn't hear a word Xie Lanshan had said, Shen Liufei suddenly asked the nun, "Do you know sign language? I saw that you have some special needs students here as well."

"I don't." The young nun gave him an apologetic smile. "Everyone here that knows sign language is out today with the headmaster for a seminar at the city."

"I'm an artist, can I request to give that little girl some lessons?" Shen Liufei had only introduced himself as company during this visit. He eyed the solitary little girl and said in a sincere tone, "She has talent, she's just missing a little bit of professional training."

Xie Lanshan immediately knew what was up. After seeing the young nun step away, he quickly rushed by Shen Liufei's side and asked, "Are you trying to have her do a forensic sketch for you? Do you even know sign language?"

Shen Liufei looked at him calmly and answered, "No."

Xie Lanshan almost cried out, "Then why—"

Shen Liufei interrupted him, "The pen is the best tool of communication between artists. As for how I should approach her first, you can look up how to do simple greetings."

Xie Lanshan was ready to roll his eyes. Shen Liufei gave him five minutes to learn the basic greetings and questions they needed to ask in sign language, either through looking it up on the internet or asking an acquaintance for help.

Xie Lanshan left the convent using the excuse of needing to use the restroom, then quickly pulled out his phone to look up some easy sign language tutorials. Meanwhile, Shen Liufei had already walked up toward the little girl. He saw the girl was drawing the scenery outside the chapel. After getting approval from her by exchanging some looks and some simple hand gestures, he picked up her pencil and began drawing on her board.

Just as the artist had said, the two only needed a pen to communicate. A few strokes and the two had grown close. The little girl smiled brightly.

They sat shoulder to shoulder and began drawing together outside the chapel. Xie Lanshan returned and walked toward the girl. He knelt to face her and said in sign language: *Your drawing is great. Do you want to chat with me?*

The little girl smiled and nodded fondly at the two pretty men.

Xie Lanshan smiled and asked: *Have you seen a very pretty and slightly foreign-looking woman lately? She rarely visits, but would always be with your headmaster when she's here.*

Xie Lanshan figured because this convent was located in such a rural area, it must not be very common to see a beautiful woman visiting the headmaster often. And for someone so beautiful that could leave an impression on an old

police officer twenty years later, surely this little girl would also have an impression of her.

The little girl thought about it and nodded her head.

This made things easier. Xie Lanshan asked in sign language: *Shall we draw a picture of her?*

The little girl nodded even more enthusiastically as she turned to look at Shen Liufei with joy on her face.

The girl started to draw, but because she was still not very skilled, it was difficult to make out the individual. Shen Liufei patiently instructed her with a pencil. After at least twenty different attempts at drawing a portrait, the two men let the little girl scan through and pick out the drawing that looked the most like Xiao Man.

That five-minute intro to sign language lesson proved no use here. Xie Lanshan couldn't understand what the artists were discussing and could only sit on the side, staring dumbly at Shen Liufei's profile.

The man had a high nose bridge, long eyelashes, and a unique profile that gave off an almost androgynous attractiveness. Shen Liufei was a very distant man who seemed above mortal temptations normally but was always extremely diligent and focused when it came to work. Xie Lanshan was mesmerized by the man and suddenly felt this wasn't such a bad way to pass the time.

Shen Liufei seemed to have noticed the affectionate glance toward him and turned to return it. As their eyes met, Xie Lanshan smiled and said something in sign language.

He managed to pick up a few more lines earlier in the restroom, including the most powerful and emotional three words: *I love you.*

Shen Liufei didn't understand sign language, but he could understand the meaning of the gesture just from the look in Xie Lanshan's eyes. He turned his head back to the canvas, but the corner of his lips lifted slightly in response.

Just as Xie Lanshan rested his head on his hand after what felt like an eternity of boredom, the little girl finally picked up her paper, studied it, and gave a confident nod.

Xie Lanshan stood up and asked Shen Liufei, "Is it done?"

Shen Liufei took the paper and looked at it. After a moment of hesitation, he walked toward Xie Lanshan, his eyebrows pressed together in a strange manner.

Xie Lanshan didn't rush to look at Xiao Man's portrait and asked, "Why did you have to pick the kid who can't speak out of all the ones here?"

"Her drawings have a unique vitality in them, which means that she has very strong observation skills and a keen eye for detail. So she must have a much stronger memory and impression of people's faces than other children of

her age. And because she can't talk, you can tell that the headmaster pays extra attention to her. Xiao Man is a special guest, therefore it's likely that she has been around Xiao Man when the woman comes to visit the headmaster."

There was some logic behind this. Xie Lanshan waited to see Xiao Man's portrait but didn't get another response from Shen Liufei, so he had no choice but to take the paper from the artist's hands. He was dumbfounded the moment he saw the drawing, and finally stuttered after a while, "Isn't… isn't this Doctor Su?"

Even though the woman in the drawing didn't look exactly like her, it was still very similar.

Just as he pondered what to do next, Shen Liufei's cell phone rang. Xie Lanshan was removed from the case, so Ding Li could only call Shen Liufei if anything came up. She said that Tao Longyue and Su Mansheng ran into the serial killer during their date, and the captain had gotten a knife right to the stomach.

Shen Liufei asked, "Is it bad?"

Ding Li answered, "Well, he ain't dead. But I think you should come back with Xie bro soon. Captain Tao saved a girl from that murderer that night. She's likely the only survivor who has seen the culprit's face!"

(iv)

The surviving girl likely saw the culprit's face and would need Shen Liufei to help draw a forensic sketch based on her witness account. The two men rushed back from Cangnan to Hanhai without a second word.

By the time the express bullet train left the station, the sun was already setting, painting the sky with red clouds and purple mist that surrounded the sun like a celestial flower garden. Of course, the miraculous scene would soon disappear like the withering of a large sunflower. If sin cannot grow under the light of the sun, the coming of darkness naturally instills fear in the hearts of people.

They returned with great findings from Cangnan. Xiao Man was only a witness they originally intended to find, but the doctor in charge of all autopsies kept silent about her involvement with the old case even as the bodies piled up. Even someone as experienced and well-trained as Tao Longyue had been injured by the culprit on their date—they couldn't have found a more solid reason to suspect Su Mansheng's involvement in the case.

The sky outside the window grew more muddied as the light disappeared, each scene blurring quickly on the high-speed tracks. Xie Lanshan analyzed the case and said to Shen Liufei, "Su Mansheng's age does match up with Xiao Man's, and from the way the culprit removed the skin so precisely, it's

very possible that the culprit is a forensic scientist."

Shen Liufei added, "It would be almost impossible for a single woman to execute such a large murdering spree all by herself. If we assume that Xiao Man is the culprit, the man who injured Tao Longyue must be her accomplice who takes her orders."

"But there's one thing I don't understand; the first female corpse was discovered twenty-five years ago, and the original suspect committed suicide four years later. Why did the culprit today wait another twenty years to continue the murders?"

"I'm wondering if there is a possibility…" Shen Liufei pondered a little before saying, "that Xiao Man had hoped to return to normal life upon rescue many years ago. However, some unexpected and strong external stimulation triggered her to break down once again, quickly transforming her from the victim years ago to a criminal today."

"This isn't uncommon." Xie Lanshan let out a sigh. The explanation was most likely the case. He said, "Poor ol' Tao."

This was still just speculation between the two men at the end of the day. They still needed concrete evidence to prove it. Xie Lanshan couldn't imagine how despondent Tao Longyue would be if Su Mansheng's verdict came out and Shen Liufei also seemed to be deep in thought beside him. They fell into silence.

The train continued to trudge forward. The end of fall was quickly taken over by the winter weather; the sky darkened faster than usual.

After a long silence, Xie Lanshan suddenly asked, "So why did you ask Zhu Mingwu those questions right before you left?"

Shen Liufei responded nonchalantly, "Old Captain Tao could be counted as my future father-in-law now. Am I not allowed to at least learn about his interests and hobbies?"

Xie Lanshan laughed. Similarly intelligent minds didn't need extra words to communicate. One glance was enough to understand each other, making both feel comfortable and trusting in the other's company. Of course, there were also downsides to this: it was difficult to hide from one another and that would only leave them bristly in a way that could damage their relationship.

Xie Lanshan's head was a jumbled pot of everything right now. All sorts of questions and strange thoughts consumed him; while he wanted to trust Shen Liufei unconditionally, he couldn't trust himself.

Tao Longyue was hospitalized the night he suffered the injury. Thankfully, the wound did not penetrate vital organs and the tough guy only had to deal with ten stitches.

Of course, Captain Tao didn't even bat an eye at his injury. As soon as he woke from his surgery, the man was already beating himself up over not being able to catch the culprit.

Tao Longyue's physician didn't like uncooperative patients like him and scolded the young captain, "I've never seen such a troublemaker like you. You were ready to run out of the hospital before you could even get off the surgery bed! Let me tell you here, that knife almost hit your spleen. If we had to remove your spleen, you wouldn't be able to do manual labor for the rest of your life, let alone be a cop on the front lines!"

"How close is 'almost'?" Duan Licheng spoke up. He had just finished another surgery and passed by to check up on Tao Longyue, who lifted his head, then turned his eyes to glance at his own doctor. His physician seemed almost the same age as Duan Licheng and had a neat look but was like an ugly duckling when standing next to the neurosurgeon. Even the long lab coat couldn't save the poor man's looks.

"It's…" the doctor didn't expect Duan Licheng to be here and stuttered, unable to answer.

Duan Licheng's expression grew rigid. "Medical professionals cannot afford even a millimeter of error when it comes to treating our patients."

The physician said awkwardly, "I'm just concerned for his well-being, and if anything happens after he gets dispatched before the suggested time, the responsibility would fall back on the hospital."

"They can hold me accountable if anything happens. We can't delay Captain Tao's work in capturing the criminal." Duan Licheng smiled and then shot a glance at Tao Longyue, who was staring back at him like a pleading child on the bed. "Besides, it's not a severe injury. His life isn't in danger."

The primary physician left the room in defeat, but his complaint echoed down the hall as he walked away, "The dude just came back from the US, who does he think he is?!"

Tao Longyue sat up from his bed when only the two of them were left in the hospital room and asked, concerned, "What happened to the girl who was saved, is she all right?"

"She mostly suffered soft tissue injuries, nothing severe," Duan Licheng said with a frown. "But she suffered strong psychological damage and refused further medical treatment. She would scream if anyone touched her at first, but now she's a little more stable."

"And she didn't say who the man that hurt her was?" Tao Longyue was regretful and thought he should have run faster that night. The young woman had already been violated despite being such a young age at fourteen or fifteen. He couldn't imagine how traumatizing the experience was for her.

“I don’t think it’s a good time to ask her about these things right now,” Duan Licheng said. “However, she’s been talking to herself and repeating the same phrase.”

“What is it?”

“Red dress.”

Captain Tao was ready to follow up with another question when a sudden commotion arose from outside. It was a swarm of reporters who had somehow found out that the police rescued a survivor. They all arrived with the same overbearing energy outside the hospital, chanting something about how the “public deserves to be informed.” The serial-killer case was grabbing too much attention from all sides. Everyone battled to get the latest scoop.

The commotion was loud, almost enough to be mistaken for an earthquake from inside the hospital. Tao Longyue felt his head boiling with rage as he struggled to get out of bed.

Duan Licheng raised a hand to stop him and said, “I’ll go check it out.”

“Young women are too afraid to walk outside at night now! Three victims have already been found dead but the police still don’t have a clue about the culprit’s motives and the connection between these victims. The killer is still roaming free before the eyes of the police—this is a grave failure of the police department, who haven’t been able to protect the safety of our citizens.”

The female reporter leading this army was from one of the sharpest and most critical news channels in the country, the Eastern Eye Witness. The news outlet was known for their sharp and direct commentaries that didn’t beat around the bush. Other reporters joined in support of her, hoping to pressure the law enforcement teams to obtain more information on the case.

“We’ve filed a complaint for disruption of medical services,” a powerful and authoritative man’s voice rang out and silenced the crowd.

Duan Licheng walked out of the hospital room toward the crowd of reporters outside. The nurses and patients who had gathered around the commotion instinctively backed off to make way for the neurosurgeon.

“Your unauthorized loitering at the medical center and disruptive social gathering on public property are severely affecting our work as medical professionals.” Knowing that it was easiest to take down a whole army by attacking its commander, Duan Licheng stood before the female reporter and gave a courteous nod. He said rather provocatively, “As an organizer of such unlawful activities, you may face a sentence of between three to seventeen years under the law of this country.”

The crowd completely fell silent at these words. Among them were new media and private reporters; many of them didn’t even have a proper license and simply joined in to get an independent scoop. The same crowd who surrounded the nurses and doctors confidently less than a minute ago noticed

the powerful aura around this neurosurgeon and quickly backed down.

The female reporter was from one of the biggest news outlets in the country and held a license as a professional journalist. She refused to retreat and instead fought back. “I’m a journalist, I have the right to request information and conduct investigations on important cases to accurately report to the public. Especially at a time like this where citizens live in fear of their safety. They have the right to know about any and all updates regarding the case.”

“All lawful rights are contradictory to inherent freedom.” Duan Licheng locked eyes with the reporter and spoke firmly, “In the case of reporting an event involving the law, especially a case that is still currently under investigation, reporters must follow the rules and conduct interviews without disrupting the police investigation. If your report exposes key evidence or intel regarding the case that directly affects the eventual arrest of the suspect, you can expect legal consequences, even if you don’t get pinned for committing a crime.”

The female reporter’s face grew pale at these words. Then the doctor gave her another handsome bow and smile before adding, “Of course, I’m sure they will be a little more lenient to a beautiful woman like yourself.”

Duan Licheng turned to the rest of the crowd gathered at the hospital before he could see the flustered face of the woman, and said, “You all can wait in the meeting room in the hospital. We cannot expose any important details or the victim’s private information, but our hospital will announce the current status of the survivor and injured police officer shortly.”

The carrot-and-stick method worked; the media wasn’t leaving empty-handed and dispersed from the lobby.

After taking care of the noisy reporters, Duan Licheng returned to Tao Longyue’s room.

Tao Longyue let out a sigh of relief and shook his head. “Journalists these days are getting out of hand. Who knows if they’re even legit or just out there to get clicks.”

“I actually think it’s better to have more curious journalists like them.” Duan Licheng smiled and said, “But of course, they must also be mindful of the method they use to gather information.”

Recalling that Xie Lanshan had once mentioned he was at odds with Duan Licheng, Captain Tao had been ready to back his buddy unconditionally and stay away from the shady doctor. After this episode, however, any residual negative impression he had of the doctor finally vanished. He looked at Duan Licheng and asked, “You seem to be quite acquainted with Shen Liufei.”

Duan Licheng nodded. “We’ve known each other for many years.”

Captain Tao was an honest man who didn’t hesitate to act friendly toward anyone he admired and admitted bluntly, “I’m not too fond of the guy, to be

honest. For someone who also came back from the States, you're much cooler."

Duan Licheng narrowed his eyes slightly as if he was tracing back his memories before saying, "That's because you don't know what he has been through."

Tao Longyue was surprised. "What kind of tragic backstory could a rich boy like him possibly have?"

"His current father is actually his art mentor. The boy's talent caught the old man's attention and they later moved to the States together because the old man didn't have a son of his own."

"What about his biological parents?"

"His entire family was murdered when he was only fourteen." After a moment of silence, Duan Licheng continued with a grave face, "Not even his eight-year-old little brother managed to survive, and his mother was also recorded as deceased after she went missing. He was the only one who survived the massacre because he was out of town during the murder."

(v)

The rescued girl had long black hair and fair skin. She seemed to be around only fourteen or fifteen years old, or even younger. Due to the horrific psychological trauma she had suffered, she couldn't speak and only stared blankly while on the hospital bed. Aside from "red dress," she spoke no other words. It would be too cruel to force her to recall the face of the criminal suspect in this state, so Shen Liufei's forensic sketch was put on hold.

The girl feared anyone who touched her body, especially her lower half, so she only received minimal physical checkups. Fortunately, her wounds healed quickly. She was cautious of all strangers aside from Tao Longyue and Su Mansheng, who had saved her from the horrors of the murderer. The girl would sometimes give intermittent responses in front of the couple and rush into their embrace in fear of being harmed by strangers again.

It was impossible to identify the victim and contact her family, which gave Tao Longyue a bit of a headache. Leaving her in the hospital could mean potentially exposing her to the harassment of shady journalists, but she had nowhere else to go.

Finally, Song Qilian came up with a solution. Considering Tao Longyue was still in recovery and a man, it would be best to temporarily leave the girl in Su Mansheng's care. After she became more mentally stable and felt less defensive toward strangers, they would send her off for therapy.

In order to make things easier, Song Qilian nicknamed the girl Xiao Qun. She even offered to stay at Su Mansheng's place for a while to help care for

the young victim. Of course, she had some ulterior motives; she wasn't able to face Xie Lanshan as she was now and didn't want to deal with Liu Mingfang's aggressive pursuit. She needed to escape these tiresome dramas, even briefly, and calm her mind.

Tao Longyue was relieved after everything was settled and decided to stay at the hospital a little longer for his injury.

Just as he stared in boredom and loneliness at the ceiling in his hospital room, Xie Lanshan came to visit.

"Damn bro, it's already been four days since I've been lying in the same bed and you only now remembered to pay me a visit?!" Tao Longyue jumped up from his bed as soon as he saw his old friend arrive and picked up an apple from a basket to throw at the visitor.

Xie Lanshan raised a hand swiftly and caught the apple in his hand, then rubbed the fruit on his shirt and took a bite. He walked toward the injured man and sat on the bed without hesitation, then said as he ate his apple, "Just checking to see if you're dead or not."

"You're still mad about how we locked you up last time? Be a man, bro, take that stick out of your asshole and get over yourself!" Tao Longyue raised a fist to punch Xie Lanshan in the chest, then quickly turned and looked at the man. "No wait, you're a bottom—Shen Liufei probably pulled that out of your hole already."

Xie Lanshan almost choked on the apple and laughed, then said after he cleared his throat, "Can't you just pretend you're still an ignorant straight dude? I'm not used to you being such a damn gossiper."

There were no grudges between brothers. Tao Longyue laughed and playfully gave Xie Lanshan's shoulder another punch.

Xie Lanshan asked about his buddy's injury, then quickly changed the topic back to the case after he confirmed Tao Longyue was fine.

"So what exactly happened that night? How could you have let the culprit run?" The journalists had a reason to be upset, and Xie Lanshan was also surprised. Tao Longyue's physical combat skills were top-notch even among his peers in the municipal bureau. It was one thing to let the culprit go during a pursuit, but how could he have possibly lost the target and gotten injured after being engaged in a brawl? The culprit sounded like an Olympic medalist in martial arts.

"Ah, you know…" Tao Longyue wanted to say that it was Su Mansheng's scream that distracted him but quickly stopped himself after realizing it was wrong to put the blame on his girlfriend. He bit down on his lip and said, "Let's say my hubris got the best of me. I'll take this as a lesson learned and I swear next time I'll catch that bastard!"

“But weren’t you and Doctor Su—” Xie Lanshan wanted to follow up, unconvinced of this explanation, only to be interrupted by another visitor.

Su Mansheng opened the door and walked into the room. She smiled faintly as soon as she saw Xie Lanshan sitting by the bed and asked, “Is Officer Xie back on the case now?”

Despite having come to an agreement with Shen Liufei to keep their speculations to themselves for now, Xie Lanshan couldn’t help but be reminded of the image of the girl in red twenty years ago as soon as he met Su Mansheng’s eyes. He gave her a smile and attempted to test her. “Yeah, just got back from Cangnan and Yuncheng. We went to the city hospital in Cangnan and that place in Yuncheng… what was it called again?” Xie Lanshan rubbed his chin with his fingers and then suddenly exclaimed, “That nunnery place!”

“It’s not a nunnery place, it’s an actual convent,” Su Mansheng corrected him. “Yuncheng Holy Mother’s Convent.”

“Right, that, but nunneries and convents are practically the same.” Xie Lanshan nodded as if he was a humble student. He then lifted an eyebrow and asked, “You’ve been there before?”

Su Mansheng responded without a change of expression, “Don’t you know already?”

She didn’t deny or confess anything, which proved that she wasn’t afraid, but certainly had something to hide. Xie Lanshan’s smile grew deeper, but his eyes remained sharp as he said, “Only a coward would choose to harm others that are weaker than them for revenge. It’s not something an honorable queen would do. That would be too vulgar.”

Tao Longyue grew even more puzzled as he listened to the conversation and grabbed Xie Lanshan to question him. “What the heck are you guys talking about, and how come I don’t understand a word?”

Su Mansheng had no intention of continuing this conversation and turned to Tao Longyue. “I’ve taken Xiao Qun home already. You can sit back and rest up for now.”

Xie Lanshan smiled and followed up with his own question, “Who’s Xiao Qun?”

Tao Longyue answered, “The little girl that I saved.”

Su Mansheng didn’t seem like she intended to linger in the room any longer and left after saying she still needed to take care of the victim.

The two men sat in the room. The sun was already shifting west; the glow passed through the window softly like a warm ray of light that peeked out from a closing stage. One of the men’s handsome faces turned against the light until he was completely in the shadows.

Xie Lanshan noticed there were painkillers by Tao Longyue's bedside and tried to say nonchalantly to his friend, "Hey Tao, take some painkillers. You might need them later."

Tao Longyue's sharp senses told him something was wrong as he asked, "What did you manage to find?"

Xie Lanshan's expression remained stern as he explained, "Your old man had a mentor by the name of Zhu Mingwu. He was involved with a huge case twenty-five years ago that took them four whole years to solve: the Cangnan Serial Rape-Murder. Eleven young women's corpses were found murdered the same way the three victims have died in our case. Their mouths had been sewn shut, they were skinned, and they suffered horrific torture before death."

Xie Lanshan handed Tao Longyue some files on the case. The captain skimmed through the first two pages and exclaimed in horror and anger, "This bastard sure is fucking twisted!"

Xie Lanshan continued, "But there's one thing that's different. The victims found twenty years ago were actually raped; foreign bodily fluids were found in their lower bodies, and not just injuries caused by shoving hard inanimate objects into their private areas. So Shen Liufei and I have a hypothesis; the culprit twenty-five years ago had a motive rooted in twisted sexual desires, but the case now is driven by hatred."

Tao Longyue nodded in agreement but asked, puzzled, "Even people in our bureau nowadays have barely heard of the Cangnan case, so what kind of person would suddenly think of replicating the same crimes twenty-five years later using the exact same torturous methods? Are you saying that Kong Xiangping has family that's still alive today?"

"Kong Xiangping was around forty when he committed those crimes. His parents died when he was young and he never married, so he had no family."

"Then who else could it be?" Captain Tao rubbed his chin and fell into deep thought.

"The truth is, when the culprit committed suicide twenty-one years ago, an eleven-year-old victim—a girl—was rescued by the police." Xie Lanshan hesitated. A complicated expression surfaced on his face. It took a long while before he finally continued, "And we both know this girl."

Tao Longyue's eyes widened and froze. Xie Lanshan added, "Look at the last page of the files."

Tao Longyue quickly flipped to the end. A folded piece of paper fell out of the folder. He opened it up to see a portrait of Su Mansheng.

It was only during this moment that Tao Longyue finally understood what Xie Lanshan meant and what that cryptic conversation with Su Mansheng earlier implied. He was dumbfounded for about ten seconds before he suddenly raised a fist and howled, "Who the hell cares if she has a tragic

backstory? I care about her, it doesn't matter! What year do you think we're living in, do I look like I care if she's still a virgin or not?!"

"You know that's not what I'm talking about!" Xie Lanshan didn't lash out in kind, knowing that his friend would have this reaction. He said patiently, "I need you to answer me truthfully; where was Su Mansheng the night we were all celebrating at the bar? And that night when you fought that culprit, did Su Mansheng call out to help that killer escape?"

"Fuck you, Xie Lanshan!" Tao Longyue didn't respond to the questions and only threw more punches, completely unfazed that his injury opened up again at the violent act. He cursed and his fists shot out like a madman's, "Fuck you! Xie Lanshan, I swear, screw you! Shut the fuck up!"

"You dare fucking curse at me again?" Xie Lanshan was also enraged and pinned an out-of-control Tao Longyue back onto the bed, forcing the man down with all of his strength. He couldn't stand seeing his good friend suffer. His eyes also warmed, but his voice remained stern as he said, "Calm yourself down, damn it, can you still call yourself a policeman?!"

With the injury reopened, fresh blood seeped through the patient's gown. Tao Longyue attempted to crawl up only to feel his energy rapidly draining. By the end, his vision was blurred, his lips were pale, and every last bit of energy he had dried out.

He could only cry, his face ugly as he yelled, "Who wouldn't want to hide their traumatic past? You think Mansheng's the only one who keeps secrets? Why don't you go ask your Shen Liufei about how his whole family was murdered?"

It was Xie Lanshan's turn to be baffled—that almost brutally cold aura, the suppressed emotions that could only be released through brawls, even those hints of hesitation, the melancholy and pain that steeped within the man like salt dissolving in seawater—everything seemed to make sense now.

After a few seconds, Xie Lanshan loosened his grip to allow Tao Longyue to crawl back up. He then turned and left the hospital.

(vi)

At first, Xie Lanshan was upset that Tao Longyue revealed Shen Liufei's story to him, feeling as if he had been lied to. But after a night of thinking it through, most of the anger had transformed into heartache by dawn. He agreed with Tao Longyue; everyone deserved a quiet and personal place in their hearts that shouldn't be disturbed by anyone else.

The temperature dropped rapidly in the latter half of November. Xie Lanshan walked out of the bathroom, fresh and clean, to immediately be greeted by a tempting aroma from the kitchen that quickly filled the house.

Ever since Uncle Tan had been sent back to the original location of his crime, Xie Lanshan couldn't stomach any other pancakes from street vendors in town. He lived off stealing Tao Longyue's breakfast, saving both time and money with easy-to-heat food. Though ever since moving in with Shen Liufei, the cop had become spoiled and only wanted his lover to cook breakfast for him every morning.

The smoked beef and sunny-side up eggs were ready to be served; only the French toast was left to be grilled. Shen Liufei poured the cream into the egg and began beating it with long chopsticks. Xie Lanshan's gaze fell on those long fingers that held the utensils. They were white and delicate. Every gesture had an elegant air.

Those hands, which emitted creativity and aestheticism, certainly were those of an artist. Xie Lanshan stared carefully at Shen Liufei's hands and then shifted his gaze back onto the man's face; the artist seemed to always have a layer of thin ice over his features that froze all expressions.

It was impossible to imagine such a sophisticated man could have a horrific and tragic past.

Xie Lanshan could feel his heart warm as he looked at this man carefully preparing breakfast for him. He loved picking out the finer details in everyday life that held traces of their love, even if they were as trivial as a gentle touch.

Shen Liufei turned to look at Xie Lanshan and noticed the cop was in a daze, then asked, "Are you planning on visiting Captain Tao today?"

Judging by Xie Lanshan's gloomy face yesterday, he could guess that the cop told Tao Longyue about Su Mansheng's potential involvement in the case. He also guessed that Tao Longyue was upset with the revelation and the two had likely gotten into a fight.

Xie Lanshan didn't respond and instead walked toward Shen Liufei with his arm out, then embraced the artist tightly.

The two men were around the same height. The warm sensation of their skin touching felt especially comforting. Shen Liufei was rather unfazed and asked with little emotion, "What happened?"

Xie Lanshan lowered his head and pressed his lips to Shen Liufei's earlobe as if he was going to whisper some words of love, only to bite down like a monster.

There was a hint of a rebuke with the bite. Shen Liufei frowned in pain, but his arms around Xie Lanshan's waist didn't loosen and instead wrapped tighter.

Xie Lanshan finally let go after venting out his frustration. He then turned to gently press his tongue along the injury he'd left on the artist's ear.

Shen Liufei remained unfazed, as if he really was unaffected by this gesture of affection. Xie Lanshan chuckled and whispered into his ear, "I'll make you

mine sooner or later, your past and future. I can wait, I'm patient."

By the time Shen Liufei finished making breakfast, Xie Lanshan already had taken out a paper bag and packed the toast and beef to eat on the way to work. He'd already exposed his hand, so now he just had to wait and see how Su Mansheng cooperated. Regardless of what people thought, she was still the only person who was familiar with the details of the case of two decades ago—and if she refused to cooperate or they pushed her too far, the case could run into a dead end once again.

The winter sun was also strangely chilling as it hung above the skyscrapers of the city, almost like a full moon at day. Xie Lanshan was in a good mood. He strutted through the streets and found the unique scenery through the naked trees quite a treat.

He walked into the hospital, and his gaze was immediately caught by a noise as soon as he stepped out of the elevator. He turned to see a young doctor run into a nurse; upon closer inspection, this young doctor was that same person who had wanted to give a romantic confession at Shen Liufei's residence—Qiao Hui.

The latter also noticed him and gave the cop a smile as he helped the nurse pick up the medication that had dropped to the ground.

Xie Lanshan walked toward the man and greeted him, "What a coincidence, Doctor Qiao."

Qiao Hui also seemed quite happy to see him and said, "I'm interning here. I just finished checking up the rooms with my director, so I have some free time right now."

The nurse took her medication and apologized to Qiao Hui, explaining that it was her fault for not being careful and running into him despite knowing the doctor had an injury on his wrist.

Xie Lanshan lifted an eyebrow and asked Qiao Hui, "You hurt your hand?"

Qiao Hui smiled and covered his left wrist. "Twisted it while I was moving."

Xie Lanshan recalled that Qiao Hui was a new arrival at the building, then after carefully listening to the doctor's Mandarin, realized there was an accent he hadn't caught before. Xie Lanshan asked, "You're from the South?"

He certainly didn't look like a Southerner.

Qiao Hui nodded and said, "I studied clinical medicine back in my hometown and then came to Hanhai for my master's."

Xie Lanshan smiled and said, "I always assumed doctors are all cool and calm, sometimes even too aloof and cold. I'm surprised to see how much of a romantic you are. How did the confession go?"

"Not good." Qiao Hui shook his head sheepishly and said, "She says I'm too immature and friend-zoned me."

“There are many people out there, don’t give up.” Just as Xie Lanshan wanted to end the conversation, he looked up and saw the nurse from earlier proudly walk out from a dressing room in a new outfit.

Perhaps she had just finished her shift, but she’d removed her uniform and donned a beautiful bright red dress that complemented her long black hair.

Dressing up could really change a person; this average-looking young woman from earlier had become a beautiful young model with this outfit. Another nurse complimented her, “I’ve never seen you dress like this, you look great.”

Xie Lanshan noticed that Qiao Hui turned his head. His eyes followed the young woman like a bright spotlight, his expression obsessive and filled with adoration. It wasn’t until the woman left that he finally pulled himself back to reality and said to Xie Lanshan, “You’re here to visit Captain Tao in room 3, right? His forensic doctor girlfriend didn’t come in last night to stay with him.”

“You know his girlfriend is a forensic scientist?” Xie Lanshan was a little shocked.

“We’ve chatted a bit. I won’t keep you around too much longer.” Qiao Hui smiled and left.

Remembering that Tao Longyue’s injury had just been restitched, and he had to suffer some violent punching, Xie Lanshan felt a little sorry for his friend and decided to give the man a break.

He walked in with his mouth ready to sweet-talk—ready to call his buddy “Taotao,” “sweetheart,” and other disgusting words. Putting on an annoying smile, he said, “Sorry, sweetheart, forgive me.”

Yet there was nobody on the bed.

(vii)

Tao Longyue returned to the scene of the crime where he’d saved the little girl. His stitches were still intact. After such a horrific event, the construction progress for the parking structure was temporarily halted. Outside the wired fence was a layer of cordon tape that stood out brightly amongst the tall trees.

It was 11 A.M. on a weekday, the street right outside the crime scene was empty. The area was close to the Zhongxi business district, and the TV station headquarters were less than a kilometer away. This location where the small park used to be seemed to keep a dark secret within the busy city.

Tao Longyue walked toward the area where he’d brawled with the killer, hoping to find more evidence he had missed. He squatted and stared at every corner on the ground, like a diligent and sharp police dog. His injury was still throbbing in pain, but it was nothing compared to the frustration in his heart.

Xie Lanshan was clear: he suspected Su Mansheng was acquainted with the culprit and perhaps even an accomplice. And, of course, the captain himself had his own suspicions.

He had searched everywhere the police had looked but found not a single piece of new evidence. Tao Longyue frowned and attempted to recall the details of that night he saved Xiao Qun.

He could have taken the culprit down that night if Su Mansheng hadn't rushed over with the girl, if Su Mansheng didn't cry out. He didn't have time to think about the situation that night with the knife in his stomach, but now that he could think with a rational mind, Su Mansheng's sudden panic at the time was certainly unexpected and abrupt.

Tao Longyue let out a small sigh and stood back up. He looked off into the distance, and his gaze landed on an alluring restaurant sign. It was the one he had gone to with Su Mansheng the night of the crime, Le Goff's French cuisine restaurant.

It was almost time for lunch, and Tao Longyue made his way over.

The restaurant offered an economical lunch special on their menu, attracting many white-collar workers from around the business district during their lunch break.

Tao Longyue saw a familiar face as soon as he stepped in—the female reporter from Eastern Eye Witness who had headed the commotion at Puren Hospital a few days ago. At her table sat three young people, including herself, all with name tags from the news station around their necks. It was clear they were out for a break with colleagues during their off-hours, like any other worker.

Tao Longyue sat in a corner. The lunch special set was quite a luxurious full three-course meal. There weren't a lot of choices, but he also wasn't in the mood to choose, so he randomly ordered something that looked decent and waited for his food.

Tao Longyue was never a picky eater and only cared about filling his stomach. In contrast, that female journalist seemed to be a difficult customer. Almost as soon as their order was served, she called the waiter over and complained, lifting her thin eyebrows. "This foie gras tastes different. Did you guys get a new chef?"

The waiter recognized the regular and quickly explained, "I apologize, Director Hao, but Chef Le Goff accidentally burned his hand, so he wasn't able to cook personally. However, he is still in the kitchen instructing others."

Reporter Hao was still dissatisfied and said, "Then you should've told me earlier. You're cheating your customers."

The waiter responded with a courteous smile as he continued to shower the customer with praise and pleasant words almost as though she were a professional food critic.

Tao Longyue lowered his head to eat, unwilling to be bothered by the scene the reporter was making. Just as he thought today was another average day, he suddenly lifted his head and widened his eyes in realization:

He'd injured the killer's wrist during the brawl with that man. He didn't hold back that night, so even if no bones were broken, the culprit would still have a bruise that wouldn't easily heal.

Before he could ponder further, Tao Longyue stood up and walked toward the back kitchen. Le Goff was instructing other chefs, then saw Tao Longyue walk in as soon as he lifted his head. The chef howled, "A kitchen is a sacred place in a restaurant. Who said you could just walk in like this?"

Tao Longyue noticed the chef's left wrist was wrapped in bandages and shot back, "What happened to your hand?"

Le Goff responded in his accented Chinese, "What's so weird about a chef burning himself?"

Tao Longyue refused to believe him and took a step forward, then said coldly, "A burn? More like a sprain. Take the bandage off. I need to check."

Of course, Le Goff didn't comply. Yet before he could voice his objection, Tao Longyue had already charged toward him and grabbed his wrist, ready to check the injury by force.

Le Goff also worked out daily and boxed as a hobby, so he immediately returned a punch as soon as he dodged Tao Longyue's tackle.

The two men quickly entered a brawl, fighting from the kitchen out into the restaurant. Sounds of fists exchanging chaotically rang throughout the building.

Tao Longyue might have been injured and his punches weren't as heavy as they normally were, but he was still professionally trained in close-range combat. He quickly got the upper hand in the fistfight and kicked a leg out during an opening that tripped the tall French chef. As the chef lay on the ground, the captain kneed the man to keep him down and fully captured.

Le Goff was pinned to the ground; he panted heavily like an angered ox and cursed with his reddened face. Tao Longyue couldn't understand what he was saying, but he reasonably guessed the words were curses in French.

Tao Longyue ripped the bandage off Le Goff's left wrist, desperate to find out the truth, only to respond in shock as soon as he saw the injury.

There was no bruise that should have indicated a sprain—it was a real burn.

Someone had already called the cops. Tao Longyue, Le Goff, and even the female reporter who suffered collateral damage during the brawl were all brought back to the municipal bureau.

Tao Jun was still recovering in the hospital, so Liu Yanbo personally dealt with the management of the bureau. He got the gist of the situation from subordinate reports and also knew that the culprit was replicating the Cangnan Serial Rape-Murder case from twenty-five years ago. He pointed at Tao Longyue's nose and scolded him, "You didn't report back when you found new evidence, conducted your own private investigation, and even beat someone up during it? Do you want to be transferred to the traffic department too?"

Xie Lanshan was also being scolded by Chief Liu and stood beside his buddy, hanging his head.

Su Mansheng walked over from behind the crowd. She was here to let Xiao Qun point out the culprit. With Xiao Qun's witness account, Le Goff certainly wasn't the killer from the night of the crime.

"The news station is right next to that restaurant. Think about how many reporters and journalists are there. Especially that reporter from Eastern Eye Witness, Hao Sijing—even if you don't care about your own reputation, think about the municipal bureau's!" Liu Yanbo rarely scolded people in such a loud voice; he was extremely upset. "Even if the culprit was wearing a mask, his eyes were still exposed. Can't you even tell if he's a foreigner or not from that?"

"I… was too rash and forgot about that…" Tao Longyue kept his head down the entire time, unable to look Liu Yanbo in the eye. He pressed a hand on his injury. Fresh and warm blood stained the palm of his hand. He hadn't let the injury stay still and heal and now he had let it open up once again. Tao Longyue turned his head and glanced at Su Mansheng, then said with his teeth clenched, "I really can't solve this case. Just give me my punishment. I'll take whatever is necessary."

"Stop picking fights. You think you can shoulder everything?" Liu Yanbo was furious at this little rascal and questioned, "Don't we have a direction for investigation already? Now that we know the culprit is replicating the Cangnan Serial Killer, then the key person will be the survivor—the little girl Xiao Man from twenty-one years ago. Go and find her!"

Tao Longyue pressed his lips together and didn't speak.

"What about you?" Liu Yanbo turned toward Xie Lanshan and said, "Didn't you go to Cangnan to investigate? What did you find?"

Xie Lanshan noticed Tao Longyue shaking in pain as if he was desperately trying to hold himself back. He didn't respond and thought it was best if Tao Longyue said it himself.

"Just what is up with you two?" Liu Yanbo noticed the suspicious hesitation between the two and questioned in rage, "Do you guys still want to keep your jobs or not?!"

“I know who Xiao Man is,” Su Mansheng’s voice interrupted.

Everyone turned to her, including the reporter Hao Sijing, who was ready to leave after giving her witness account. The reporter stared at the doctor with bright and sharp eyes, like a bald eagle waiting to prey on rotten flesh.

Su Mansheng’s gaze scanned all the excited faces watching her and with an exceptionally calm tone she said, “I am Xiao Man.”

The Perfect Victim

Su Mansheng entered the questioning room as a witness. Because the case involved some personal details, with Su Mansheng's permission, Song Qilian also joined the questioning as a psychologist in case the discussion triggered more traumatic memories.

Tao Longyue stayed away from the room and allowed Xie Lanshan and Ding Li to conduct the questioning. Xie Lanshan did his best to maintain objectivity and professionalism when speaking to Su Mansheng to avoid triggering terrible memories. He asked, "Can you still remember the situation when you were locked in the basement many years ago?"

Su Mansheng seemed almost unaffected by her past trauma; no sign of emotion surfaced as she answered honestly and calmly. She recalled the culprit was obsessed with women who had long black hair and wore red dresses. He would collect these girls as if he was collecting dolls and lock them up in the dirty and foul-smelling basement in his home. Then, after a period of torture and sexual assault, he would kill them all one by one.

Xie Lanshan asked, "How long were you trapped inside that basement?"

Su Mansheng said, "A month, three months, or more. I can't remember."

Xie Lanshan asked, "How many other girls were locked inside the basement with you at the time?"

Su Mansheng answered, "There were seven at most. Some were adults—twenty-somethings—and younger teenage girls. I was probably the youngest there—but of course, all of the girls died."

Xie Lanshan continued, "Aside from Kong Xiangping, who committed suicide before the police could arrest him, were there any other criminal suspects in Cangnan during that time?"

Su Mansheng seemed to hesitate a little before responding, "No."

Xie Lanshan caught that moment of hesitation and pressed his eyebrows together slightly, then asked, "Do you remember how Kong Xiangping died?"

Su Mansheng didn't stutter this time and responded coolly, "When Officer Zhu took me out of that house, I saw that man lying in the bathtub. He had slit his wrists. There were three white candles lit beside the bathtub with a bloodied doll, and the whole floor was covered in his blood. I heard from Officer Zhu later that Kong Xiangping was heavily intoxicated before he committed suicide. Perhaps he was scared that his evil deeds were about to be

exposed."

The session went by smoothly. Su Mansheng was very cooperative and confessed anything she recalled, admitting she didn't remember some details. Like a steadily twirling top, she spoke as if it was someone else's story, remaining completely unaffected and emotionless. According to Song Qilian, this was an abnormal response from a professional standpoint.

Right before wrapping up, Xie Lanshan asked her one last question, "Why were you the only one left alive when everyone else died?"

A strange expression flashed across Su Mansheng's face for an instant. It took her a while before she recovered. She said in an airy tone, "Because I conceded to him and served him. I chose to yield to him when he violated me, time and time again."

Xie Lanshan didn't return to the violent crimes unit office after he left the bright and clean questioning room. Instead, he found a window nearby and stood dully as he smoked in silence. Song Qilian walked out along with him and noticed the usual lively face was painted by a layer of melancholy. She knew he was worried about Tao Longyue and wanted to console him, but couldn't get the words out of her mouth.

Xie Lanshan turned around first and noticed Song Qilian standing behind him. He quickly extinguished his cigarette and smiled. "Sorry for smoking around you."

Song Qilian shook her head and walked up to Xie Lanshan, also leaning on the window beside him and feeling the cold winter breeze through the opening.

After a few minutes of silence, Xie Lanshan lowered his gaze and said apologetically, "Sorry, I'm a cop. There are some questions I needed to ask."

Song Qilian knew he was afraid that the mention of the past case had harmed Su Mansheng and said, "You've done well enough already."

Xie Lanshan turned to look at Song Qilian and grinned with an eyebrow lifted. "That's certainly a compliment from you. Don't forget that I'm a violent patient who didn't pass his psychological assessment."

Xie Lanshan didn't intend to scold her by bringing it up; it just slipped out without thinking, yet Song Qilian felt her body heat up suddenly, her face and eyes red as she whimpered, "Sorry, I didn't know that report would cause so much trouble for you."

Xie Lanshan's gaze strayed outside the window, past the municipal bureau's track field, through the layered trees, the buildings of the city, and finally past the smoky clouds in the sky. Recalling the deceased Zhuo Tian and that nameless eight-year-old boy, he shook his head and sighed. "Maybe you were right all along."

His voice was a little wistful, his gaze soft and almost clear. It suddenly reminded Song Qilian of Xie Lanshan, her Xie Lanshan.

"A-Lan, I…"

The words never made it out. Song Qilian noticed that the hint of sorrow and warmth deep within Xie Lanshan's gaze vanished—the man's lips curled up, his eyes glowed. She followed the direction of his gaze and noticed Shen Liufei at the receiving end of that passionate and adoring look.

About two hours later, Su Mansheng left the municipal bureau with Xiao Qun after she completed all procedures.

Someone blocked her as she stepped out of the door.

Reporter Hao Sijing had been waiting by the front gate of the Hanhai City municipal bureau. She was a thirsty journalist who craved these sorts of explosive news stories. She'd used her powerful network within the industry to uncover details about the Cangnan Serial Rape-Murder case, and upon reading through them, decided that she could not let such a big exclusive slide.

She chewed on her already stale mint gum, then spat it out into the wrapper as soon as she saw Su Mansheng and tossed it on the ground. She first stood in front of the little girl and pointed a cell phone camera in front of her face, asking directly about her assault. Su Mansheng naturally pulled Xiao Qun back behind her and stood in front of the camera.

Hao Sijing's eyes lit up and she continued talking, "You're the only survivor of the Cangnan Rape-Murder case, Xiao Man, right? You were only eleven at the time. How come you were the only one who survived after all those adult women died?"

Su Mansheng walked away with Xiao Qun's hand in hers, uninterested in answering the same question she had just been asked earlier.

It almost seemed like the victim had developed a superiority complex, and this aloof attitude angered Hao Sijing. The reporter became more determined to dig down to the core of this case. She pestered and asked, "So can I assume that you survived because you were an accomplice, that you helped that twisted culprit in harming those girls back then?"

Su Mansheng turned around to look at the reporter. Her pressed lips trembled slightly, expression resolute and powerful.

The little girl, Xiao Qun, wasn't fully recovered from her traumatic experience and was still unable to speak due to shock. She clung to Su Mansheng's side—the shared trauma connected the two like magnets. She might be small and weak, naïve and young, but she also stared with anger at this awful and toxic reporter.

Hao Sijing noticed the gaze and leaned in to pat the little girl's hair, attempting to explain her good intentions, "Don't worry little girl, I'm just doing work—"

Su Mansheng lifted a corner of her lips coldly and interrupted her, “You’re just probing into others’ private lives to satisfy your own selfish and toxic desires.”

“Say what you want, but I believe you still have secrets. I believe what I said earlier was already infinitely closer to the truth of the story.” Hao Sijing smiled arrogantly and declared war on the cold queen before her, “I will request my higher-ups to create a special program for this case and slowly dig out all of your skeletons.”

The reporter walked away with her head held high. Su Mansheng let Xiao Qun slide into the passenger seat as she drove them away from the municipal bureau.

About two streets away from the bureau, Su Mansheng suddenly turned the steering wheel and parked her car on the street. Like a snapped rose, a heavy shadow suddenly covered all the light in her eyes. She lowered her head and buried her face in the steering wheel.

Xiao Qun stared at her in confusion from the side. Su Mansheng remained in that position for a long while, her shoulders trembled slightly—and the girl was unsure if she was crying or laughing.

From Su Mansheng’s witness account, red dresses were an important clue to solving this case.

Among the three corpses discovered, none of the victims wore a red skirt. So even though Xiao Qun had also repeated the same words, the police had never considered this as a common characteristic and important piece of evidence shared by the victims.

Because he was once a suspect of the crime, Xie Lanshan paid particular attention to the first victim, Luo Xin’s outfit and appearance. He said with a frown, “I remember the first victim was wearing a pink blouse and a long black dress, not a pure red dress.”

Shen Liufei pondered for a little while and said, “Can we consider this possibility instead? Perhaps the culprit didn’t decide to commit the crime because he saw the victim wearing a red dress; instead, he happened to become acquainted with the victim dressed in that outfit by chance. Then, after a brief period of stalking, he finally committed the crime—and that’s why the victims were all dressed differently when they were killed.”

Xie Lanshan had an epiphany from this hypothesis and quickly followed up with, “Three murders within such a short period of time shows that the culprit didn’t spend too much time stalking and investigating his victims. Therefore, the chance of them all being indiscriminate murders is significantly reduced. If we investigate the last time the victims wore a red dress out and the people they came in contact with in that outfit, we could narrow down the suspects.”

Shen Liufei nodded and said, “Especially Luo Xin, the first victim of the crime. She was a freelancer who rarely left her residence; she would not be in contact with many people often.”

The mist dispersed, and a direction for the investigation suddenly became clear. Liu Yanbo ordered, “Pull up all surveillance footage from the building Luo Xin lived in and track down every person she came in contact with the day she wore a red dress. Let’s see if we can catch anything suspicious!”

Shen Liufei’s residential building was equipped with heavy surveillance, thus it wasn’t difficult to pull out footage days before the crime. The camera was right outside Luo Xin’s door, making it clear to see when she left her house and what she wore.

In order to save time, the footage was replayed at 16x speed. Ding Li could feel her head spin. Xiao Liang felt completely at a loss. Only Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei focused their attention on the screen, carefully observing every detail. Xie Lanshan’s eyes were already sharp, but Shen Liufei, as an experienced forensic sketch artist, was still sharper. The latter suddenly called out, “Here, pause for a second, please.”

They rolled back the footage. Two days before the crime in the evening, they saw a young man carrying a fruit basket walk out of the elevator toward Luo Xin’s residence.

Xie Lanshan called out, “It’s him.”

Puren Hospital intern doctor Qiao Hui. In order to confess his feelings to his female friend that night, he had already spent days going up and down to pay visits to his neighbors to ask for help with the lighting.

The young woman’s door opened to Qiao Hui’s knocking, but because of the angle of the camera, it was difficult to tell what Luo Xin was wearing inside her house. The two seemed to chat happily for a little while before Qiao Hui handed the basket of fruit to Luo Xin and left.

The young man hadn’t walked off too far away, and Luo Xin poked the upper half of her body out the door. She lifted the fruit basket and said something to him with a grin, perhaps thanking the young man for the fruit.

Her long black hair draped down her back, complementing the bright red dress she wore. In the dim light of the security camera, she shone like a bright torch of fire.

Xie Lanshan called out, “Rats!”

He recalled the way Qiao Hui stared at the nurse that day in the hospital.

(ii)

Someone suddenly assaulted the young woman from behind as she clocked out of work. A heavy item, like a wooden stick, struck her head from behind

and she quickly lost consciousness.

In violent pain, the woman opened her eyes—to discover her mouth had been sewn shut. A dog collar hung around her neck. The leather collar emitted a strong rotten stench while the metal rivet painfully stabbed her skin.

The man standing before her pulled out a surgical knife and looked at her from above.

She shook her head desperately, wanting to beg for mercy but unable to speak. Every time she attempted to open her mouth, the thread that had sewn her lips together would rip through her flesh, melding the taste of blood and saliva in her mouth painfully.

Qiao Hui knelt and shushed the girl. He wore vinyl medical gloves and gently caressed the woman's face as he said, "Stay put, don't call out. Cries will attract the police. I was almost caught last time because of it."

The woman turned her head in an attempt to dodge this sickening touch. Tears rolled down her face in fear and disgust. She couldn't fathom how such a sophisticated and kind young doctor could be such a monster.

From Qiao Hui's perspective, white-bark pine trees surrounded the area like an otherworldly forest. This was a high-end residential area still in development that advertised itself as "the forest in the city," as it was built near the large lake by the city border. The developers even planted more trees and flowers to create a green paradise within the urban cityscape.

The location was also very close to Puren Hospital. Qiao Hui loved bringing his victims to places like small parks, parking lots, or other abandoned buildings. There were too many unnoticeable corners within the city that its people passed through helplessly like ants.

The young woman had already suffered a heavy blow to her head and did not have enough energy to fight back. Because the leash was tied around her hands, she couldn't crawl up and could only attempt to wiggle her way out. Qiao Hui found this useless and unsightly attempt laughable. He violently kicked the woman down and then looked into her eyes, passion flickering in his own.

The image of this young woman dressed in red once again appeared in his mind. He chuckled. Flares of red flashed within his eyes—women with long black hair and red dresses were vibrant to him, like blooming canna flowers dancing in flames.

Qiao Hui knelt again and harshly stripped the woman's clothes, obsessing over the act. He violently exposed the woman's body, then held his sharp and clean surgical knife, picked out the cleanest piece of skin, and prepared to peel it off.

Loud barking suddenly rang out from outside the white pines, quickly followed by sounds of rushing footsteps and motorbike engines.

Qiao Hui's expression froze—he had been discovered.

As soon as he confirmed that Qiao Hui was the culprit, Xie Lanshan immediately called the Puren Hospital and asked the nurses to contact the young woman he'd seen last time, but her cell phone was turned off and she'd become uncontactable almost as soon as she left the hospital. After analyzing the locations of the crime scenes in previous incidents, the municipal bureau narrowed down potential places and sent out rescue dogs.

Her impending death compelled the young woman to cry desperately for help as she forced open her sewn mouth and cried out, a bloody taste spreading over her tongue, "Help! Help me!"

"Over there!"

A black bike rushed out of the green forest; the spot of red at the front of the bike shone like a spark of fire in the darkness.

Qiao Hui immediately abandoned the girl and ran off; Shen Liufei accelerated and sped to chase after the culprit on his bike.

Qiao Hui could only run into the forest, but a bike blocked his path in front and dogs chased after him from behind. He was soon trapped on all fronts and forced to retreat to the lake. The young doctor clenched his teeth and lifted his leg, then jumped right into the water.

Xie Lanshan wanted to jump in when he saw Qiao Hui dive, but almost as soon as he ripped his shirt off, Shen Liufei grabbed him around the waist from behind.

Xie Lanshan's tense body struggled instinctively as he tried to argue, "He's going to escape!"

Shen Liufei tightened his grip on Xie Lanshan, his deep voice a gentle shackle that rang out, "It's too dangerous."

The lake was too large and the current rushed too fast. The sky was already dark. It would be too dangerous to jump into the water right now.

After they sent the injured girl back to the hospital, the water police arrived and attempted to fish up Qiao Hui's corpse. Of course, they didn't end up finding anything, and perhaps this devil was given another chance to live and escape.

Another corpse was discovered as they were chasing after Qiao Hui—Liu Mingfang's secretary, Xia Hong.

Xia Hong's death was identical to the previous three victims; her mouth was sewn shut, her skin stripped away, her lower body violated, and a black dog collar hung around her neck. The autopsy confirmed Xia Hong's death to be five days ago when Tao Longyue was brawling with Qiao Hui in the parking lot, the night when the culprit had escaped.

Judging from the killer's signature, this was clearly a case committed by the serial killer. Liu Yanbo would personally handle the investigation of the case

from here on out, suggesting that Xia Hong was perhaps the next victim that Qiao Hui preyed on after he failed that night. Yet aside from Xia Hong, it could be concluded from the surveillance of Puren Hospital that the other two victims of this serial killer had once visited family or friends in a red dress.

The municipal bureau first sent out a wanted notice for Qiao Hui and then made a public announcement for women to be extra careful when walking outside by themselves. Of course, no secrets could be kept forever. A handful of online journalists exposed the key information of the features all the female victims shared: having long black hair and wearing a red dress. Some gossipers even connected this case to the old Cangnan Serial Killer and further perpetuated the media storm. People fear the unknown, so the terror associated with the murder case dwindled as the culprit was exposed. Instead, the focus of the case shifted from Qiao Hui onto Xiao Man.

The details of the Cangnan case leaked onto the internet and exposed Su Mansheng's identity. It first began with independent reporters riling up news for clicks but quickly snowballed into a violent tsunami on social networking sites.

Strangely, while people could forgive and be more lenient toward the young Xiao Man, they would not let go of the adult Su Mansheng, who was also working in public security. For a brief period, the story from over two decades ago became almost like a myth through word of mouth. Some people even brought up the potential of an eleven-year-old Xiao Man developing Stockholm syndrome and falling in love with the killer. Others reasonably questioned how such a young girl could survive under the hands of a twisted killer—or perhaps, could she have possibly been an accomplice?

All eleven victims from the Cangnan case had been skinned, sliced at the mouth, and then had the cut sewn back together. There was only one exception, and Xiao Man didn't seem to match the others enough to be considered a victim of the case.

They only needed to arrest the culprit to close the case, but something still didn't sit right with Xie Lanshan. If Qiao Hui was simply replicating the Cangnan Serial Killer, it was natural for him to follow the known details of the case and to sexually violate the victim, skin them, and sew their mouths, but it had been twenty-five years already—just where had he obtained the key information about the red dress that even the police hadn't been aware of until now?

Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei found the woman that Qiao Hui wanted to confess to that night at their building, only to discover that this woman didn't fulfill the red dress and long hair requirement that Qiao Hui obsessed over. The young woman had short hair, was slightly portly, and had a large face with big eyes. She dressed in comfortable jeans and spoke with a refreshing

slight Northern accent.

She'd become acquainted with Qiao Hui while she was volunteering at Puren Hospital. The young man fell in love with her at first sight and restlessly pursued her. Qiao Hui was a medical student with good grades, tall, and rather good-looking, so she'd wanted to try pursuing a relationship with him at first. Yet after a few dates, she noticed that something was off about the man. The girl said that she had already rejected him the week before Qiao Hui hosted that dramatic confession.

Xie Lanshan asked her, "You guys haven't known each other for that long, so what about Qiao Hui did you find was off?"

"I feel like he's a momma's boy, or to be blunt, I think he's got an Oedipus complex." The girl was still a little uneasy after learning that Qiao Hui was the horrific serial killer on the news and sighed. "He looked quite modest and kind. I wouldn't have thought he was such a creepy, horrific monster."

Xie Lanshan was shocked. "He has a mother? Have you seen her before?"

The girl shook her head and said, "No. She might not be his mother, it might be an older woman he's acquainted with. He always refers to her as just a 'family member.' There was one time when I went out shopping with him and passed by a jewelry shop; he suddenly said that he wanted to buy a present for his mother. He bought a crystal necklace in the end. He's already around twenty-four or twenty-five, so his mother would be at least around fifty now, but the style of the necklace he bought looked a little too cutesy for her age. It looked a little like a cartoon character, and he even carved his name on the back of it—either way, it was just really weird."

Shen Liufei followed up and asked, "So what made you think about the Oedipus complex part?"

The girl pondered a little before saying, "I guess it's not as serious as that, but more like he seemed super obedient to his mother and especially didn't want to upset her. He was quite sincere to me and had really creative ideas, like how he tried to light up a building to confess to me. I was honestly pleasantly surprised at first, and asked him why he was so good to me. He said that he's never actually asked a girl out before and that I was the first."

Xie Lanshan nodded slightly and said, "That's not too uncommon. Some people don't tend to be involved in relationships that early." If he wasn't working right now, Xie Lanshan would have shot a glance at Shen Liufei when he added, "Or maybe he just hasn't met the right person yet."

The girl said, "It's not, but then he explained to me right after and said that his family is very strict, insanely strict. They don't allow him to fall in love with girls, not because they were afraid he would get into a relationship at an early age, they just don't allow him to be in one. He said that he used to have a crush on a girl when he was in high school, then got into big trouble after his

family found out. Oh, right, he said that his family also forced him to follow in his father's footsteps and become a doctor. It was when he said this that I confirmed the person who told him all of this was his mother."

Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei both noted the particular line about "following in his father's footsteps."

The girl continued, "He said he didn't want to become a doctor because he always thought the human body was disgusting when he was little. He even said that girls with long hair in dresses were also gross… he even looked like he hated them when he said that; it almost scared me. That's when I told him without hesitation that I wouldn't meet up with him again."

The two men left as soon as they finished the interview. Shen Liufei drove Xie Lanshan's car while the cop sat on the passenger side. The day was still young, crowds of people filled the streets as the light of dusk shone from the sky.

Both of their minds were still on the case. Shen Liufei turned his head slightly to see Xie Lanshan's eyebrows furrowed, lips pressed together in deep thought. He said, "Are you still thinking about that whole 'following in his father's footsteps' line? You suspect that Qiao Hui is actually Kong Xiangping's son?"

The two men didn't need to share more words between them; Xie Lanshan also turned to return the gaze and saw the artist was as aloof and distant as usual. Noticing that Shen Liufei's gaze was focused on the road, Xie Lanshan joked, "If you weren't driving right now, I would jump and give you a kiss."

It might have sounded like a joke, but there was still some hope hinted at between those words. He stared at, begged, for the driver's lips, but Shen Liufei's expression remained unfazed. Xie Lanshan's bit of excitement was let down as he complained, "Man, my cuz sure doesn't care—"

Before he could finish, Shen Liufei turned the steering wheel and abruptly parked the car by the roadside.

He swiftly undid his seat belt and leaned over to hold Xie Lanshan down and pressed their lips together into a deep kiss. It was an abrupt but also sweet act that took Xie Lanshan by surprise. The cop was easily satisfied with just a peck to quench his thirst, but Shen Liufei seemed to want more. Before Xie Lanshan could react, he felt a warm and invasive sensation in this mouth; Shen Liufei's tongue brushed against his teeth, then reached deeper, toward his throat.

Xie Lanshan's whole body was paralyzed until he couldn't help but raise his arms to embrace Shen Liufei, feeling his lover's strong back. He accepted this passionate exchange.

The surprising kiss satisfied the little desire in Xie Lanshan's heart as he wiped his lips almost reluctantly. Shen Liufei drove the car back onto the road.

His face was still cool and blank. He began analyzing the case as if nothing had happened, his tone and voice calm and smooth. “Do you remember what Zhu Mingwu said? He said that they found infant supplies in Kong Xiangping’s house. His theory back then was that the culprit may have also harmed infant girls, but now it looks like those may have been for his son.”

“If Qiao Hui really is Kong Xiangping’s son, he would have only been about three or four years old twenty-one years ago.” The age matched up, but Xie Lanshan was still suspicious and said, “But the files said that Kong Xiangping never married or had a child, nor was anyone who knew him aware he had a son. This means the child must be illegitimate; but what makes this more strange was that before Qiao Hui was exposed, during Su Mansheng’s witness account, she didn’t mention anything about another child in that basement.”

Shen Liufei paused for a moment before saying, “There’s one possibility.”

Xie Lanshan already knew what he wanted to say and finished the unspoken words, “The police didn’t find any feminine products in Qiao Hui’s house, so he obviously doesn’t live with this ‘mother’ of his. Perhaps this woman isn’t even his birth mother and someone he simply recognized as a motherly figure.”

From this analysis, Su Mansheng was still a suspect in the case—even more so than before. It was likely that she befriended or developed some strange relationship with the four-year-old boy at the age of eleven.

“But the case is still strange.” Xie Lanshan let out a sigh after thinking about the pain and struggle Tao Longyue must be going through and said, “If Su Mansheng was truly the mastermind behind this case, just what triggered her to commit such a crime over twenty years later?”

“I suspect that Luo Xin isn’t the first victim of this serial killer,” Shen Liufei said coolly after some thought. “Schopenhauer said there are only three forces behind human action: the wish for one’s own happiness, wishing ill on others, and wishing for the happiness of others. The only difference is the ratio of each force’s presence within a person—even if the person is a pure evil murderer.”

The night fell as the streetlights lit. The streets were filled with white-collar workers who had just gotten off work, creating a typical rush-hour scene.

Xie Lanshan recognized this wasn’t the route back home and asked, “Where are we going?”

Shen Liufei stopped at a red light and answered, “To Tao Longyue. Don’t you have a ton of questions to ask him?”

The car stopped in front of Puren Hospital. Before Xie Lanshan unbuckled his seat belt and walked out of the car, he suddenly remembered that day when Shen Liufei wrapped an arm around his waist to stop him from jumping into

the river. He turned around toward the driver and said grimly under the dim light, “You should just drive my car from now on.”

Shen Liufei lifted an eyebrow, not sure what this line meant.

“Four wheels are safer than two,” Xie Lanshan said earnestly. His eyes glowed under the streetlight in an almost adoring manner as he said, “I can’t stand your wild bike riding, it’s too dangerous.”

“I was only rushing to chase after the culprit…” Shen Liufei attempted to give an excuse, only to find his heart soften as he stared into the man’s eyes. He lifted the corner of his lips and said, “Sure.”

Xie Lanshan was in a good mood and dropped one last line before stepping out of the car, “If we weren’t on the streets right now, I would jump over and do you right this moment.”

These words became much more suggestive as soon as he recalled the sudden kiss earlier.

Yet Shen Liufei’s expression remained blank as he lifted a hand and issued a punishing slap to Xie Lanshan’s butt, saying, “Let’s get the job done first, you’re next on the list.”

(iii)

Xie Lanshan cut the small talk and went straight to the point in the hospital room, asking Tao Longyue, “Did you ever tell Qiao Hui that Su Mansheng is your girlfriend and a forensic scientist?”

Xie Lanshan thought that since Qiao Hui was the serial killer, he wouldn’t possibly go visit the captain he had physically brawled with not too long ago. Therefore, it was very possible that he had found out about Su Mansheng’s occupation from the woman herself. In other words, they’d been long acquainted.

Realizing that his girlfriend was still a suspect, Captain Tao yelled, furious, “Are you fucking done yet? The case is over once Qiao Hui is arrested! What’s your reasoning for chasing after Mansheng like this?”

“Because I’m a cop and I believe there are still suspicious points in this case!” It was impossible to communicate with this man, but Xie Lanshan knew that his childhood buddy was not unreasonable. Xie Lanshan suppressed his anger and patiently analyzed the situation for his friend, “You’ve been a cop for years, can’t you tell that there’s still something fishy about this case? Qiao Hui is likely just a puppet and there must be another mastermind behind this.”

Xie Lanshan shared the result of his investigations from that day with Tao Longyue, then explained his reasoning based on the evidence. He felt that Su Mansheng’s reaction in the questioning room was too calm, her story too

smoothly told, and that she must have kept some secrets. The optimistic interpretation was that this resulted from the trauma of her horrific past, but on the other side of the coin was the possibility that she could have been involved, or that she was the true mastermind behind this serial murder.

Yet no matter how reasonably he tried to explain his logic, the anger on Tao Longyue's face remained. In the face of Xie Lanshan's continued questioning of whether or not Qiao Hui had spoken to him before, the captain only responded stiffly, "I don't know."

This shocked Xie Lanshan. "You don't even know if you've talked to him before?"

Tao Longyue's attitude remained cold as he continued, "That's right, I don't know. I also don't know why Shen Liufei didn't tell you about how his family got murdered!"

"You're being absolutely fucking unreasonable right now. Listen to yourself!" Xie Lanshan finally realized that no words could get through to him and felt a burning rage. He then left the room, slamming the door shut.

Tao Longyue was also pained by his growing tension with his buddy lately, but he really couldn't help himself and only knew how to spew abuse. After giving some more thought about the information Xie Lanshan had brought in, he crawled off the bed, clutching his injured stomach, and quietly left the hospital.

He first stopped by a market nearby and picked out some of Su Mansheng's favorite foods. He then left, satisfied with his haul of vegetables and meats; it looked to be enough for a full-course meal on the dinner table.

He called a cab and made his way toward Su Mansheng's house. Almost as soon as he stepped into the residential area, he noticed all the neighbors had their eyes locked somewhere, colorful expressions on both familiar and unfamiliar faces.

Tao Longyue ignored them and walked toward the building Su Mansheng lived in. He immediately noticed upon stepping up the stairs that Su Mansheng's front door had been splashed with bright red paint. Painted on the wall beside it were large lopsided words:

Whore. Criminal. Murderer.

The words were pungent with malice and Tao Longyue grew furious. He took his jacket off and was ready to wipe away the undried paint, but the door suddenly opened.

Ever since netizens had begun hunting down Xiao Man, Su Mansheng had been forced to take days off. It seemed as if she hadn't left her house the last few days; her face was fragile and pale.

She also saw the words on the wall but didn't throw a fit like Tao Longyue. She only turned around calmly and said, "Come in."

Tao Longyue asked, “These words…”

Su Mansheng said without turning her head, “The family of Luo Xin, the first victim, came here already. They might have believed what was being said on the internet and wanted justice for their daughter.”

The house was locked up like a prison. No windows were open. Xiao Qun curled up in a corner and stared blankly at the woman walking in. It wasn’t until she saw Tao Longyue follow in behind her that her expression brightened up with joy.

Tao Longyue was also happy to see Xiao Qun and waved the bags of groceries in his hands as he said, “I’m here to cook dinner for our two lovely ladies today.”

Xiao Qun still couldn’t talk and instead nodded vigorously, then ran up to give Tao Longyue an embrace. While Su Mansheng walked out to the living room, the little girl pulled on Tao Longyue’s sleeve and gestured, then pointed at the woman behind them, stuttering her words, “She… talk to herself… scary…”

As if she’d heard the little girl, Su Mansheng turned around abruptly. A pale face and reddened eyes glared at Xiao Qun, scaring the girl away.

Tao Longyue had tried to give Su Mansheng a call before he stopped by, but her cell phone was turned off. The phone was on do not disturb mode, resting on the coffee table. Tao Longyue knew that Su Mansheng had been receiving countless harassment calls lately. It pained his heart. He asked, “Is that reporter still pestering you?”

With Su Mansheng’s silent acknowledgment, Tao Longyue cursed out loud in anger, “That woman sure is the scum of journalists!”

The woman Tao Longyue spoke of was Hao Sijing from the Eastern Eye Witness, and she was the most difficult to deal with and harshest of the harassers. Hao Sijing had been wanting to write a groundbreaking news piece. She had been so desperate that she was even willing to expose Su Mansheng’s information to force the woman to speak out in public. Tao Longyue didn’t doubt that professional journalists were behind these internet callouts. Of course, now that it had stirred up a storm among the netizens, it was too late to cover it up.

Captain Tao had been living even more prudently than Xie Lanshan these last few years and barely used the kitchen. His claim to cook was only a poor attempt at a bluff; it was questionable whether the food would be edible at all.

He frantically prepared the ingredients in the kitchen, sweat dripping down his body. Xiao Qun stood beside him and helped, looking more capable than the main cook himself.

An adult man cooking with a young girl in the kitchen was certainly an interesting scene to watch. Su Mansheng stared from outside and finally let

out a bit of a smile.

The dishes ranged from too salty to tasteless; the vegetables weren't fully cooked and could barely be eaten, the steak was overcooked to the point it was virtually rubber. It was still the first time he'd served the girls. Captain Tao gloated about his cooking, forcing the two ladies in the house to experience the "meal" prepared by his master chef's hands.

The dinner table was filled with laughter. Su Mansheng didn't have much of an appetite, but her pale face grew a little more lively.

Captain Tao offered to wash the dishes after the meal. He turned back to see Su Mansheng standing not too far away, eyes on him as he worked. Despite knowing she was trying to hide it, he could still see the worry and bleakness in her eyes. Her usual queen-like demeanor had vanished completely.

Tao Longyue felt his heart sting. He placed the clean dishes down and escorted Su Mansheng back to her bedroom. He asked her in concern, "You don't look well. Should I stay the night with you?"

Tao Longyue really wanted to speak to her, heart-to-heart and with reason. He couldn't help but feel concerned about his girlfriend's abnormal attitude.

Yet before he could even speak up, Su Mansheng suddenly pinned him down on the bed. It was rare for her to be so aggressive. She pressed her body on him, showering passionate kisses all over his face and lips.

Tao Longyue was shocked at first, but quickly returned the kisses. Amidst their loving exchange, he attempted to turn over and regain his position on top, only to be kicked by Su Mansheng in his injured stomach and pressed back down.

She pinned him down almost violently and bit him aggressively. Her hand grabbed Tao Longyue's hair before she reached down under her pillow.

Suddenly, she felt something cold and wet beneath her hand. She turned to look and noticed it was a bloody piece of human skin.

Su Mansheng's gaze grew cold and violent. She carefully placed the piece of skin back in its place and let go of Tao Longyue, then ordered, "It's getting late, you should go back. I still need to take Xiao Qun out tomorrow to Qilian's place for therapy."

Tao Longyue noticed she was hiding something. The truth was right before him: he tried to grab her hand and suggested, "I think you're the one that needs to go see a therapist."

But Su Mansheng pulled her hand away.

Tao Longyue took a step forward at her obvious uncooperative attitude and asked bluntly, "Why did you hide the fact that Kong Xiangping had a son?"

"It's been twenty years. Can I not forget some details of the case?" Su Mansheng responded sternly, but her gaze kept floating around, as if she worried her lover would discover her bloody secret.

“Qiao Hui had long been in contact with an adult woman and even gifted a necklace carved with his name on it to this ‘mother’ of his,” Tao Longyue said. “Tell me, just how did this man know about your personal details without ever being acquainted with us?”

“I don’t know,” Su Mansheng responded with that same unbothered attitude. “I don’t even know him.”

“If it’s you, please turn yourself in.” Tao Longyue’s eyes reddened, his heart throbbing in pain as he said, “If it’s not you, then you also haven’t let go of your trauma like you thought you did. You need more help—”

“Just leave!”

Su Mansheng refused to communicate and screamed out in pain. She pushed Tao Longyue out the door, then dropped to the ground and cried out, her head buried in her hands.

That night, Su Mansheng locked her bedroom door. A strange knocking sound rang throughout the night; Xiao Qun was too afraid to sleep from the noise. She sat on her bed with her arms around her head until morning.

The first ray of light was a beautiful rose color that gently passed through the window from the sky and landed on the face of the girl. Xiao Qun carefully walked out of her bedroom to peek out, noticing that Su Mansheng’s closed door was finally open.

A strong, curious heart led the young girl to peek inside. Su Mansheng’s room was a mess; her desk and chair were out of place, all sorts of clothes and items covered the floor as if she had been searching for something. Xiao Qun noticed that there were some letters on Su Mansheng’s bed. Age had taken a toll on the yellowed pages that were dug up from storage after so long. People still hand wrote letters in this day and age? She became more curious.

“What are you looking at?” A scolding voice came from behind the girl.

Xiao Qun turned her head and met a pair of cold eyes, then took a step back in fear.

Su Mansheng stood behind her, her hair and face both wet. The gentle light of dawn quickly brightened her up from behind; shadows on her face grew darker as she stared with her hollow eyes.

Xiao Qun’s first impression of Su Mansheng was striking. She thought the woman looked like a female warrior wielding a long sword in one hand and a shield in another. The woman had been kind and solemn, beautiful and brave. She felt safe around this woman but also felt a little envious of her. Yet at this very moment, she was genuinely afraid of the very same woman.

“You should get ready.” Su Mansheng noticed her abnormal attitude from Xiao Qun’s fearful face, almost shocked at her own change as well. She closed her eyes and tried to soften her voice and expression, then said, “We’ll go see Doctor Song in a bit.”

Xiao Qun was shocked to see that a crystal necklace hung from the woman's long neck. It was shaped in a cutesy cartoon design.

Su Mansheng took Xiao Qun to Song Qilian's clinic for her scheduled session. The girl seemed to be recovering very well. While psychological trauma still severely affected the little girl's reading and writing skills, her cognitive abilities were recovering. She could now speak simple words and phrases and could communicate through eye contact, small gestures, and body language to make up for her troubled speech. Song Qilian's report for her had shown that she was responding very well during their therapy session. With the help of medication, Song Qilian was confident that Xiao Qun would fully recover her speech function soon.

Song Qilian first let the nurses take Xiao Qun out of her office and kept Su Mansheng behind to teach her how to help the little girl's recovery at home. She invited the forensic scientist to sit in her office.

Song Qilian had also seen the internet callouts on Xiao Man and all sorts of abuse. She sighed and said, "You've done a lot already. Not only did you need to handle your own situation, but you have to care for a child that is a stranger to you."

Su Mansheng didn't find Xiao Qun's existence an extra burden. Rather, she felt as if she was finally making up to her young self of many years ago by helping this poor soul who had been harmed the same way as her. She said, "We share the same wounds. I see my past self in her."

Song Qilian followed up and said, "If the past Xiao Man wants to talk to someone, I'm always ears for her."

Su Mansheng looked at her and said sharply, "Did Tao Longyue ask you to do this?"

Song Qilian nodded her head and said, "If you think I'm too young and inexperienced, I can refer you to a more experienced specialist in our hospital. But if you just want to speak to someone as a friend, my door is always open for you. Of course, I will maintain my professional integrity and keep your secrets confidential."

Seeing how Su Mansheng remained unfazed, as if she was purposely maintaining a tough front to protect her true self, Song Qilian smiled. She said to the forensic scientist as a friend, "Did you know? Tao Longyue was completely intoxicated when he came to me and cried in desperation. I've known him for over a decade and had never seen him so helpless before; he was always bright and hot-blooded, courageous and straightforward. You're very lucky to have a man like this shed tears for you."

These words touched the softest part of her heart, tickling those unmoved chords. Su Mansheng's expression softened as she turned to Song Qilian. "You're also quite fortunate yourself, having a man like Xie Lanshan who

would willingly give his life to protect you."

"He's willing to do so out of our long years of friendship, but I'm no longer the person he loves." Song Qilian couldn't hide her pain as she heard this name. That stinging pain seemed to jab out from within her, numbing her limbs and senses. Tears welled in her eyes as she looked at Su Mansheng earnestly and said, "I don't want you and Tao Longyue to follow down the same path I did. If you love him, then trust him like how he loves you, and face the challenges with him together. Don't be like me and wait until it was too late to even regret your actions."

Su Mansheng seemed to shake as her voice quivered. "It's not that I don't trust him, I'm…"

She stopped abruptly, but Song Qilian could tell that this woman before her had finally stepped out of her damaged past. That little jail cell she had trapped herself in to keep the world out had finally opened up a little room for people to reach inside.

She reached over and held Su Mansheng's hand, using the warmth of her flesh to console the woman, and said, "Why don't you talk it out and we can both try to find a solution together."

Su Mansheng closed her eyes out of exhaustion. Moments later, she asked, "Doctor Song, is multiple personality disorder a real illness that exists?"

This question was strange; as an experienced forensic scientist who had worked in public security for years, Su Mansheng would know that dissociative identity disorder was an actual condition in psychology. Song Qilian nodded and said, "It's typically a mental health condition that is born from extreme psychological trauma and stimulation. The patient would develop a second or even more personalities that act as their 'guardian' to protect their main personality. These different 'persons' coexist independently within the same body. Sometimes these personalities eventually vanish or sleep as time passes and the main personality heals, but further stimulation and untreated conditions can trigger the subpersonalities to reappear or sometimes even overtake the main personality."

Su Mansheng seemed to have expected this answer and only asked, trembling, "Can you promise me that you will not reveal what I have to say next to anyone, no matter what happens?"

Song Qilian recognized the severity of the issue and nodded her head solemnly to promise.

Su Mansheng nodded in gratitude, but her lips suddenly lifted strangely as she said, "I've been experiencing periods of time where I feel I'm in a trance and sometimes not even sure where I am… There's a piece of human skin from one of the victims' bodies hidden beneath my pillow. I found over ten years' worth of letters written to me by Qiao Hui in the depths of my

wardrobe, and I'm even wearing the necklace he gave to me right now carved with the word 'mother'…"

Su Mansheng paused, in pain, and closed her eyes. She caught her breath and finally said after a while, "I think I'm a patient of dissociative identity disorder and that I'm the mastermind who was controlling Qiao Hui."

(iv)

The last time they tried to move, Duan Licheng had interrupted and the serial-killer case had been riling up, so plans for Shen Liufei to move in had ground to a halt. While the case was now nearing its end and Xie Lanshan was busy chasing down Qiao Hui, Shen Liufei took the opportunity to return to his building. He planned on cleaning up a bit more to officially move in with his lover.

The early winter night was silent and hollow. Black clouds covered the sky, and no starlight shone through, leaving only a sharp crescent moon lingering in the darkness. The house was also dimly lit. Shen Liufei sat before his desk and fell into deep thought, facing the laptop screen before him.

Old case files filled the screen. He wanted to clean them all up but still couldn't bring himself to click delete on the files. Amidst his hesitation, cold sweat already covered the palm of his hand.

Shen Liufei opened up the folder labeled 0001 and looked carefully at the photo of the suspect.

The Xie Lanshan of now and Ye Shen of the past—their faces and expressions looked identical but also slightly different. Despite sharing the same body, the soul inside was entirely different. He carried his hatred from the massacre and an unsolved mystery on his shoulders, had planned for his revenge and attempted to insert himself into the life of his target, only for it all to become a sappy love story that started with a beautiful meeting and that could last for a lifetime. How awfully ironic.

He had never expected any of this to happen before the curtains of this carefully written show rose.

Xie Lanshan had once said before his car accident: *I feel like I've seen you somewhere.*

Shen Liufei responded now to the dimly lit screen: *I do too.*

The doorbell rang. The door opened to a chilly breeze, and along with it came Song Qilian.

Shen Liufei didn't expect Song Qilian to pay him a visit and invited her in, patiently waiting for her to explain her sudden call.

Shen Liufei took out a can of soda from the fridge, opened it up, and offered it to Song Qilian. He said, "My apologies, I've been busy moving, so

this is all I can offer."

"No need for the trouble, I'm here to ask for your help," Song Qilian said without touching the soda on the coffee table. "Someone came to me for help regarding her mental health condition, it's extremely severe, and has something to do with the current serial-killer case. I want to help the person and also help a-Lan solve the case."

She took a sip of the soda and continued a little timidly, "I am the one who caused him trouble by writing that mental health assessment."

Realizing that the patient mentioned was Su Mansheng, Shen Liufei pressed his eyebrows together slightly and asked, "Why didn't you go ask Xie Lanshan yourself?"

Song Qilian said, "He already paid me a visit. Tao Longyue also came as well, but I promised the patient that I will not reveal her secret, and as a professional, I cannot give you details about the patient's condition."

Shen Liufei asked, "Then what brings you here today?"

Song Qilian's eyes lit up and her tone grew more anxious as she said, "I know you majored in forensic sketching when you studied in the States, but you were also involved in criminal profiling, right?"

Shen Liufei nodded, "Correct."

Song Qilian let out a sigh of relief and said, "Since you're an expert in criminal psychology, can I ask you about a difficult case as a psychologist for my patient?"

This was quite a smart move; it not only was within the ethical grounds of a professional, but this consultation could also potentially help the police solve the case. Shen Liufei gave his silent approval and said, "You may go on."

She briefly summarized the condition by using "the patient" instead of the person's actual name, then said, "The greatest crime in the world is the violation of young girls, like Fang Siqi's experience." This was a reference to a novel that delved into the lives of little girls such as Fang Siqi, who had been sexually assaulted and gone mad because of all the malicious shaming by outsiders. Outside the novel, similar harmless rumors on the internet were just as vicious as the fangs of a beast ripping through the shells of a certain woman until all her senses and every last bit of her pride had been torn apart.

Song Qilian said that the patient refused to discuss the case further and chose to withdraw into a heavy cocoon away from the world. The doctor was worried that the patient was reaching her limit and feared that the patient would soon do something even more awful and regrettable.

She finally said that rather than invading the patient's personal space to offer a helping hand, she sincerely hoped that this strong and brilliant woman she once knew could take a courageous step and ask for help first.

The crescent moon still lingered in the sky when Su Mansheng once again woke up from her trancelike state. She couldn't remember what she'd done and only stared down to look at herself; her palm was cold, half of her body was wet.

The room was still dark. She had grown to despise the light and voices of people ever since the storm on the internet went viral. She wasn't afraid; the rumors simply annoyed her. In the darkness, Su Mansheng heard sounds of water running from the bathroom and carefully made her way over.

Su Mansheng opened the door and was greeted by a dim light, then she was immediately stunned; her eyes widened as if her soul had left her body.

Beside the bathtub were three lit candles and an old and dirty doll placed on the ground. The doll was covered in blood and stared at her with an eerie smile as if it was sentient.

The scene before her eyes triggered the most horrifying nightmare deep in her memories; Su Mansheng shook violently and almost fell to the ground. She managed to regain her balance. Within a split second, she saw her own eyes through the mirror in the bathroom—those eyes were foreign, evil, and mad.

The strange noise summoned Xiao Qun, and she followed the sounds through the darkness. Yet her little gestures alarmed the woman in the bathroom. Su Mansheng suddenly rushed toward the little girl and roughly grabbed her shoulders, shaking as she called, "You did this, right? You were the one that did this, right?!"

Xiao Qun was stunned by this act and struggled to run, but Su Mansheng rushed forward and knocked the girl to the ground; warm liquid rolled down her face after her forehead hit the hard flooring.

The girl reached a hand past her straight bangs over her forehead. Her hands were stained with fresh blood.

"Who did this? Just who in the world did this?" Su Mansheng was on the brink of madness. She shook the girl's shoulders as she knelt on the ground, ignoring the fact that the girl was injured.

"It…" Xiao Qun was already suffering from a headache from earlier. This violent shaking only worsened her pain as she struggled to speak up. She stared at the woman with hazy eyes and pointed a shaking finger at her, then called out, "You… you did it!"

Su Mansheng was taken aback and loosened her grip. Xiao Qun quickly took this opportunity to run back in fear.

Su Mansheng stood up in a daze and turned to stare at the bathtub that was already overfilling with water. Words such as "whore" and "criminal" rang inside her ears. The entire world thought she was a criminal, and the laughable fact was that she now also believed those rumors. Guilt, fear, regret, and other

negative emotions poured over her like a tsunami; she suddenly let out a chuckle.

She wanted to return to her mother's womb, that safe haven before she was born. She wanted to be wrapped in its warmth, sheltered away from all the pain and conflict.

At that moment, the bathtub filled with warm water before her eyes looked just like a mother's womb. Su Mansheng noticed that there was a surgical knife placed on the tub. The blade was sharp and cold—just one slice to her wrist and she could go home.

Su Mansheng carefully picked up the surgical knife. Just as she was about to cut her wrist, a beam of red light suddenly shone from outside the window, the police sirens screaming as groups of police cars rushed over.

Moments later, someone called from outside and knocked on her door—it was Tao Longyue's voice.

Su Mansheng woke from her trance and quickly opened the door.

Before Su Mansheng could speak, Tao Longyue grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the house, then shouted, "Someone just called the cops! Qiao Hui struck again right by your house. We might need a forensic scientist at the scene!"

Su Mansheng was physically dragged to the crime scene by her boyfriend, only to hear from Ding Li, who had been waiting, that someone called the cops as they passed by. It was just in time, so the victim was only injured and was now on their way to the hospital.

Tao Longyue howled, "Where's Qiao Hui?"

Ding Li felt her eardrums throb at this loud shout and took a step back before she said, "He… he ran away… we were so close too…"

Tao Longyue cursed, "Damn it! Again! If we don't capture this madman as soon as we can, he could start murdering indiscriminately. Who knows how many innocent young women will die by his hand by then!"

Xie Lanshan was also called out. His expression grew grave once again seeing how close they were to arresting the culprit. He suggested, "We don't know where he's hiding within the city. Now that we know Qiao Hui has an obsession with long hair and red dresses, let's put out some bait with the help of a female officer to send him back where he belongs."

He eyed Ding Li as he spoke.

Ding Li felt her soul leave her body as she considered potentially facing a serial killer head-on. She shook her head and said, "N-no, no, no, I can't… I-I'm just a back-end worker…"

Captain Tao said, "You're the only woman in the entire violent crimes unit. Who else is going to do this if you can't?!"

Ding Li refused to back down and said, almost sobbing, “But he’s a real creep. I don’t even know self-defense. You guys never even let me go in to infiltrate Miss T’s club last time…”

“That was last time,” Tao Longyue said as he glanced toward Su Mansheng. “This is an order. You can’t possibly ask us to put a random civilian’s life in danger.”

“I… can’t I just… quit my job…”

“Oh, come on, you’re—”

Su Mansheng suddenly spoke up, “I’ll do it.”

Xie Lanshan and Tao Longyue both turned to her and asked, “You?”

She was ready to do something inconceivable a second ago, but now the spirit of a public security official reignited within her. Perhaps it was an occupational habit, or perhaps she always had this kind of powerful energy within her. Like a freshly blooming flower that could weather storms, she would always stand up to every opportunity. All the regret and guilt she felt for the victims and the fear and hatred for the criminal fueled a torch of shining fire, giving her strength to fight with her life on the line. Su Mansheng said with confidence, “Please trust me. If there’s anyone that could lure out that madman in this world, the person is me.”

Xie Lanshan asked, “What do you plan on doing?”

Su Mansheng pondered a little and said, “It’s too ineffective to just walk on the streets. I need to go on television. I will accept the Eastern Eye Witness’s interview.”

(v)

Su Mansheng knew before she went on television that this was a setup by Song Qilian. There was no assault by Qiao Hui that night she almost committed suicide.

Song Qilian hadn’t broken her promise to her patient. Aside from Shen Liufei, no one knew that Su Mansheng suspected she had a second personality. She simply passed on Shen Liufei’s idea to Tao Longyue and Xie Lanshan, gambling on the courage and sense of justice in Su Mansheng’s heart.

Su Mansheng was thankful to Song Qilian; this charade had come at the right time and knocked her awake from this nightmarish life. She planned on exposing her mental health history after she completed the interview and captured Qiao Hui.

Xie Lanshan was also thankful to Song Qilian. He said to her that if it wasn’t for her help, young Tao might still be crying his heart out at home right now.

Of course, this wasn't completely her idea. Two petals of pink blush surfaced on her face as she said, embarrassed, "I'm just doing what I must. Besides, I owe you an apology. It's my honor to be able to help you out."

The conflict between them that had once seemed like a deep trench felt like it had never been there in the first place. All the unanswerable questions she had suddenly became trivial as soon as she learned how to let them go. Song Qilian looked at Xie Lanshan, mustered up some courage, and grabbed his hand.

The faint and sweet scent from her soft skin floated up. It took Xie Lanshan aback at first, but he didn't pull his hand away. He thought she was still feeling guilty about the assessment and held her hand. He smiled and said softly to her, "You've contributed a lot to this case, so once it's all settled, we'll make ol' Tao treat us to dinner. You can bring Changchang over too."

At the potential of another date, Song Qilian felt her heart jump. She wanted to smile but was also scared. Her lips opened up slightly on her face that looked like a flower bulb ready to bloom.

Shen Liufei never planned on fighting over someone with a lady and was a man of his word. He stood on the side and watched them for a bit, strangely feeling that it was quite nice to see this woman become close to Xie Lanshan again. His throat became dry as he backed off and asked Xiao Liang for a cigarette.

"Wait, I thought you didn't smoke, Mr. Shen?" Xiao Liang was a little shocked but quickly pulled out a pack for the man. The Hanhai City municipal bureau wasn't lacking in handsome men, but Mr. Shen was particularly more cold and attractive than others. Anyone that stood next to him would immediately feel inferior, as if they were no better looking than a pile of mud on the ground.

Shen Liufei bit down on the cigarette without lighting it up. He only smelled the tobacco inside and watched Xie Lanshan and Song Qilian from a distance, wondering how he should go about quitting this bad habit of smoking.

Su Mansheng had heard of the Eastern Eye Witness even before she went on screen. The program was known for covering the most controversial news within the country, insisting on always filming live even after seven to eight years of operation. The host, Xing Ming, was known for his sharp tongue and blunt words, yet he still maintained a level of moral integrity and humanity to not offend the guests. On top of that, his handsome face and good reputation earned him many fans; it always ensured his programs became a hot topic of discussion across cities.

In other words, viewership was guaranteed. This was also the first time Su Mansheng appeared in public as well, so this was bound to become the next

trending topic on the internet; she was certain that Qiao Hui would see her.

Su Mansheng wore a red dress and did her hair on the day of the filming. She rarely presented herself like this; her long black hair trailed down like a smooth waterfall behind her back, her elegance unparalleled. The program agreed to allow her some time for a confession before the show ended.

In front of the camera and the audience, Su Mansheng didn't express anger or frustration, despite knowing that any sort of uncontrollable rant after days of malicious rumors could justify her poor attitude.

She looked at the audience with a calm face, the first words out of her mouth being, "I didn't do anything wrong."

As the head journalist of the case, Hao Sijing sat in the audience and stared at her.

"I'm not wrong for being violated because I'm beautiful. The ones in the wrong are the people here who put the blame for the assault on the victim, upholding the narrative of 'skirts being too short.' I'm not wrong for refusing to fight slander that I cannot win against. The ones that are wrong are the same people who call me ugly names like 'prostitute' and 'whore' because I survived…" Su Mansheng said as she met Hao Sijing's gaze. She spoke with confidence, "You all are even worse than those rapists who physically violate people. Every single one of you is an emotional abuser…"

These words were too blunt and harsh; the director feared that Su Mansheng would become too worked up, and held up a sign from backstage to remind the host, Xing Ming, to control the situation or cut to commercial.

Su Mansheng stood on the stage and Hao Sijing was down below. Xing Ming could read the scene of the two women crossing blades through their gazes. The host furrowed his brow slightly and held up his hand, gesturing to the director to let the woman continue.

"However, I choose to forgive." Su Mansheng suddenly removed her gaze from Hao Sijing and turned toward the audience. "I'm not forgiving those who don't deserve my forgiveness. I'm forgiving myself because I don't believe I should be punished again for being hurt in the past."

Just before the program ended, Su Mansheng found Tao Longyue in the audience and gave him a smile before calmly giving her last line:

"Like every one of you, I want to love and be loved; I deserve to love and be loved. That's why I will stand with my head upright and proudly walk under the light."

A roar of applause filled the studio. Tao Longyue's eyes reddened. He quickly rubbed them in fear people were going to see him, then joined in with the clapping.

Su Mansheng felt a new sense of relief when she walked down the stage, as if she had just let go of a burden. She turned to find Xing Ming and thanked

the man for letting her speak her mind. The host had left an impression on her; in terms of style, his words certainly were sharp like a blade. He was the same type of cool and handsome man as Shen Liufei, but while the latter was too aloof and distant, the former was sharper and more ambitious beneath his cold surface.

"To be quite honest, I'm very surprised that you accepted the Eastern Eye Witness's interview. I admire your courage; it's not easy to rip open old wounds and expose yourself in front of the entire country." Xing Ming had recently become the vice editor of the editorial section of the company within the last two years, managing over a hundred employees beneath him. His only television program was just a particular section in the Eastern Eye Witness. He now rarely engaged in scouting for first-hand reports as a journalist.

He turned slightly to shoot a glance at Hao Sijing before turning back to Su Mansheng and said, "I've seen those awful comments on the internet. I will look into it, and if I discover that the mastermind behind those rumors was someone from our program, I promise I will give you a proper apology."

Su Mansheng gave him a smile and said, "Sure." She then turned to find Tao Longyue.

This episode quickly became the next trending topic on social media websites. In fear of what might happen, Su Mansheng asked Tao Longyue to send Xiao Qun over to stay with Song Qilian temporarily, waiting patiently now for the fish to take the bait.

Gentle Teeth

Judging by the timing between Luo Xin's death and the following two victims, Qiao Hui would act within two to three days after he locked in on a target. After the episode about sexual assault on the Eastern Eye Witness, the violent crimes unit had been keeping an eye around Su Mansheng's residence around the clock, even offering to deploy personal bodyguards around her. However, Su Mansheng refused on the grounds that it would become too obvious to the culprit, risking the failure of their mission. So they had no choice but to wait for Qiao Hui to take the bait.

Qiao Hui may have taken a more conservative route this time. The police had been waiting for a full week and didn't see even a sign of the man.

The sky darkened earlier during winter and the streetlights glowed in a warm yellow. Xiao Liang's old car parked by the street looked no different from a car parked overnight in a residential area. He was on duty with Ding Li tonight.

"Why are we the only two tonight?" This was the first time Ding Li had participated in a front-line mission like this, and reluctance and dread were written all over her face as she complained, "Where's Cap'n Tao?"

"He's been waiting here for days already with an injury, he's gonna end up back in the hospital again if he stays here any longer." Xiao Liang sipped his boba coffee slowly. The special blend coffee with tapioca balls certainly created a unique taste, but he was most afraid of falling asleep. He said, "Besides, Old Tao is checking out of the hospital today. Cap's got his hands tied up."

"What about senior Xie?"

"Big bro's also been on standby the last few days. We can't let him die from overwork." Xiao Liang's sharp and clear eyes stared outside the window—his vision was top-notch even among his colleagues. He split his attention between keeping an eye out the window and listening to the situation inside Su Mansheng's house.

"What about Mr. Shen?" Ding Li pestered.

"Mr. Shen's just a specialist in the bureau, not a cop. Dang, why do you have so many questions?!" Xiao Liang turned and flicked her forehead with his free hand and said, "Stay alert, remember that we have to serve the people! I know Cap'n Tao said to contact him immediately if anything happens, but listen, I can handle Qiao Hui on my own, don't worry."

Ding Li couldn't stand being bullied and flicked her colleague back. While the two were engaged in their childish fight, a delivery person arrived on his bike. Deliveries often came in and out of the residential area during the day. It was already 7 P.M.,

close to the end of the rush hour for food deliveries.

Xiao Liang allowed Ding Li to continue hitting his arm as he turned and said, defeated, “All right, all right, that’s enough. We have work to do still.”

“But it’s not even that late? He can’t possibly commit a murder this early.”

“That’s not true,” Xiao Liang said. He was still more experienced in these types of situations than her and explained, “Gotta strike when people least expect, you know?”

“Is he really going to show up?” Ding Li rubbed her head and pouted, “We have eyes everywhere. If I was Qiao Hui, I wouldn’t show up.”

“What kind of young woman would dare walk out in a time like this in a red dress? This guy’s like an obsessive drug addict, he’ll take the bait as soon as he sniffs something out.” Xiao Liang took another large gulp of his coffee and said as he chewed on the boba, “Besides, doesn’t Doctor Su know him? He has to show up.”

The two stopped their conversation, but nothing came out of the other side of the listening device.

“Say, what do you think Doctor Su’s role is in the Cangnan case?” Ding Li broke the silence after a few minutes. She was a typical internet addict who loved reading gossip, believing every word on the web. She asked, “Didn’t the internet say that she was that Kong Xiangping guy’s accomplice?”

“You still believe that? That female journalist from the Eastern Eye Witness already got fired—” Xiao Liang stopped abruptly, his eyes widened, and he shouted, “How long has that delivery boy been inside?”

There were still no sounds from the other side of the listening device. Xiao Liang recognized something was off and carefully adjusted his headset to listen in closer. Stray dogs barked around this residential area every night. There was no reason for the headset to be completely silent.

Xiao Liang quickly got out of the car and called out to Ding Li, “Give Captain Tao a call, quick!”

In the eyes of the violent crimes unit, Su Mansheng’s appearance on the news program was the lure that resonated with Qiao Hui’s obsession. However, Su Mansheng herself believed that her performance on screen was the real bait for the man. Judging from her strange relationship with Qiao Hui, the words she had said were a blatant betrayal as a “mother” to him—and an angered child certainly had the right to question his mother.

Convinced that she had a split personality and to avoid her other self from contacting Qiao Hui, Su Mansheng had voluntarily turned off all of her communication devices and requested the violent crimes unit place listening devices throughout her house.

Su Mansheng stood up from the darkness as she heard someone sneak into her home, and turned off the listening devices. She still wore the vibrant red dress but cut off the excess fabric on the skirt to maximize mobility. Her strong and slender legs

were exposed beneath the dress like a proud goddess of war.

She was a woman, a victim, a hidden criminal, and a cop.

As a woman, she had already stood up and spoken up for all women who were victims of sexual abuse. As a victim, she needed to fight for her justice. As a hidden criminal, she planned on offering her own blood to atone for her sins. As a cop, she was ready to relinquish her life to accomplish her goals at any moment.

The lights inside the living room were off, leaving only the moonlight piercing through the windows. Su Mansheng purposely left on the lights in her bedroom and played relaxing music to fool Qiao Hui, luring him into the trap. She hid herself in a corner of the bedroom.

By the time the police outside noticed something was off, she thought, there would only be two different possibilities for the situation to end inside the house. Either Qiao Hui would die or Qiao Hui would be injured and she would die; either way, she did not plan on letting the evil murderer leave tonight.

The house was spacious and large—she could clearly hear every little creak of the floor as the invader walked toward the light in the bedroom.

Su Mansheng tightly gripped the knife in her hand. She often trained in boxing clubs during her free time and had gained some muscle that made her body more rugged than the average woman. At this moment, every muscle in her body tensed up, ready to strike.

The air grew colder, her opponent drew closer. Sweat rolled down her tall nose as she reminded herself to control her breathing, then wait for the right moment to strike her enemy.

A silhouette first peeked in across the floor and grew larger as the person stepped closer. Su Mansheng found the right time and struck.

Qiao Hui instinctively dodged the flash of the blade. The knife stabbed right into his shoulder and he growled in pain. He quickly turned, showing the disgusting and horrifying sight of a bloody human skin mask on his face. Su Mansheng was caught off guard for a moment, then immediately took a blow to her head from the metal rod in Qiao Hui's hands.

The delivery disguise and bike helmet were all tossed outside the house. This metal rod was something he'd taken out from the delivery box. It was also the tool he'd been using to violate his victims.

Su Mansheng's head spun as she took two steps back, then after regaining her balance, she quickly lashed forward again.

The two soon engaged in a fistfight—more accurately, they were ripping, cutting, and scratching each other.

The knife and metal rod dropped to the ground, the mask and skirt both ripped. Qiao Hui fought like a madman, but Su Mansheng was also fighting for her life. Even though she was much smaller than him, she still held up a good fight; she was more dexterous and professional—she did not fear pain nor death.

The two fell onto the ground once again, and Su Mansheng used the opportunity to choke the man's neck with her thighs.

Qiao Hui was out of breath but dared not to cry out; both in fear of attracting the police and accelerating his suffocation by this powerful force. After another struggle on the ground, Su Mansheng found an opportunity to jump back up. She sat on the man's chest, spread her legs out to pin down his arms with her body. She picked up the knife she had dropped earlier and prepared to give him a fatal blow.

The man began begging for his life and repeated, "Sorry, I won't do it again." He wanted to find a moment of hesitation to strike back at Su Mansheng using the surgical knife he hid in his sleeve.

"I'm sorry, I'm a bastard… I promise I won't do it again…" Qiao Hui said as he reached for his knife.

"That's right, you're a bastard." Su Mansheng stabbed down without hesitation just before the man was able to strike, cutting through his throat.

Fresh blood spilled out and stained the walls along with her face. The dying man twitched in an ugly manner beneath her.

Su Mansheng lowered her head and exposed that ugly mask on his face, eyes on the face beneath the mask. Qiao Hui was rather decent-looking in appearance and tall, but his death was ugly and pitiful as his face twisted in tears. The fearsome serial killer was merely another coward who could only hide behind a mask. Su Mansheng stood up and spat in disdain on his body.

The red police lights shone outside the window. Su Mansheng opened the window and lifted her head in the gentle breeze that blew into her house, greeting the bright moonlight with a face stained in blood.

The music that played from the bedroom continued with a serene melody. She could hear the dogs barking, the sirens, and cries of pedestrians, and footsteps outside. She also heard the powerful heartbeat within her chest.

Hundreds of thousands of years ago, almost as long as the start of creation, there lived a group of people on this land. They were helpless wives and enduring mothers. They were benevolent and kind ones, who still offered love and compassion to the world that only turned its fangs to them.

And so gentleness must be accompanied by sharp teeth.

By the time Tao Longyue arrived, the battle had already ended.

Su Mansheng wiped Qiao Hui's blood from her face but couldn't stop her own from rolling down her nose and mouth. She trudged with injuries toward her lover and smiled. "Do I look like a mess right now?"

Her forehead and chin were bruised, teeth covered in blood inside her mouth.

Tao Longyue embraced this woman tightly. He buried his face in her neck and wept, "You still look great, you're always beautiful."

The next day, Su Mansheng turned herself into the bureau with Tao Longyue by her side. She gave the necklace, the letters spanning over ten years, and the piece of human skin to the police. She confessed she was a patient of dissociative identity disorder and judging from the contents of the letters, also the mastermind that incited Qiao Hui to murder innocent girls.

Su Mansheng was very cooperative and confessed that she would shoulder all legal consequences that came with this.

Yet the tech team reported a surprising discovery. Among the letters, some paper was purposely made to artificially look old and the writing had been tampered with to look a little different between letters. It was as if they were made to look like the writer had matured over the years, but in actuality, they were all written very recently. In other words, while it was indeed Qiao Hui's writing, the letters had all been written around the same time, and not that long ago.

Even more shocking was that after an investigation of Su Mansheng's residence, the team discovered that there were traces of drugs in her water cups. All the strange migraines, trancelike states of mind, and depression had originated from a drug called mefloquine, which could even trigger thoughts of suicide.

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The investigation team assumed that the serial-killer case would finally end with Qiao Hui's death, but the confirmation that Su Mansheng did not have dissociative personality disorder and was unacquainted with Qiao Hui proved that the "mother" who was behind the murder cases was someone else.

The violent crimes unit summoned an emergency meeting in response. Xie Lanshan rubbed his chin and analyzed the situation, "Su Mansheng is a doctor, so the only way to drug her without letting her find out is to do small doses over a long period of time—there's only one person who could possibly do this."

Shen Liufei nodded at the revelation and said, "We missed the most important person."

Despite the mysteries of the case clearing up and all evidence pointing at Xiao Qun, Xie Lanshan still couldn't believe it and said, "But she only looks to be about fourteen or fifteen. She wasn't even born when the Cangnan incident occurred. There was no way she could have been able to obtain all this information that not even the police knew."

Shen Liufei pondered briefly with his eyebrows pinched together, then gave a bold hypothesis, "Appearance isn't an accurate determinant of age. Do you remember? She once cried and yelled about not wanting to go through a physical examination at Puren Hospital. Now that we've pieced everything together, it seems likely that she feared the doctor would discover she had once borne a child."

Tao Longyue was in a state of disbelief as he asked, “A child? You mean that child is Qiao Hui?”

Shen Liufei said, “In the Cangnan murder case, the police had found feminine products and infant supplies in the culprit Kong Xiangping’s home. We’ve assumed that Su Mansheng was a ‘mother’ in spirit to Qiao Hui based on their ages and that they’ve known each other since childhood and kept in contact with Su Mansheng’s assumed secondary personality. Yet Kong Xiangping never married, so it’s possible that the child was stolen or picked up. It could also possibly be a child he had with one of the girls he kidnapped in his basement. And that person is the second survivor of the Cangnan case besides Su Mansheng, which means they are also the mastermind behind the current serial-killer case.”

Tao Longyue gasped, “And you’re saying that person is Xiao Qun?” Not that he didn’t want to believe it, but this sounded like an impossible fantasy straight from a novel. The young girl looked innocent and young, and had been shy around everyone except for the captain himself; who could have imagined she would be an evil middle-aged woman?

Xie Lanshan continued, “This also explains why the culprit waited twenty years to replicate the murders. Qiao Hui was a first-year graduate medical student when he first came to Hanhai City. It’s possible that Xiao Qun, who came to Hanhai City with her son, had seen Su Mansheng on the streets one day.”

Tao Longyue still wasn’t following and asked, “Then why does she have such a twisted hatred toward Mansheng to the point she’s willing to plan out such a meticulous and evil plot to force her into committing suicide? Wasn’t Xiao Man also a victim back then?”

Xie Lanshan responded, “She must either be a malicious person at heart who wishes ill on others or trying to fulfill her own selfish desires. I have a theory: Xiao Qun may have Stockholm syndrome and perhaps truly fell in love with Kong Xiangping, so she developed a hatred toward Su Mansheng, the last victim who caused Kong Xiangping’s death.”

Tao Longyue responded after considering the possibility, “These are all just assumptions right now. Either way, we need to bring Xiao Qun back to the bureau and ask her to find out the truth.” He added after a little more thought, “She must still be at Qilian’s house. Because we were busy chasing down Qiao Hui, we told the girl that we’ll have her stay temporarily with Qilian for therapy and sent her over.”

Shen Liufei checked the time and asked with a frown, “What time is News China airing?”

Mr. Shen had come back from the US and didn’t have a habit of watching the news every day in China, but he knew that the country’s biggest news channel would announce the death of the murderer Qiao Hui today—and Song Qilian was the person who was credited for the plan to capture him.

This would mean that they were letting a dangerous killer live under the same roof as her sworn enemy. Xie Lanshan recognized the danger of the situation and ran out the door with a grim expression.

It was rush hour in the evening; the streets were filled with traffic. It would almost be impossible to pass through, even with a police car. Rescuing a person was as urgent as putting out a fire; Shen Liufei called out to him, “Xie Lanshan, I’ll take you over.”

Night fell, the sky darkened like the abyss. The television was tuned to the News China channel while Song Qilian was cooking for the two children in the kitchen. She carefully prepared the ingredients. Through the sizzling sounds of hot oil and cooking, she heard the news report that Qiao Hui seemed to have been captured.

A refreshing stir-fried vegetable dish, steamed fish, and chicken soup with red dates were set on the table. Xiao Qun had always preferred light dishes, and Song Qilian’s son had a small ulcer in his mouth, so dinner was simple and healthy.

“Xiao Qun, Changchang, time to eat,” Song Qilian called out to the children’s room after she placed the utensils down but received no response.

She turned to look into the living room when she suddenly heard a loud banging from the bathroom and rushed over.

As soon as she opened the door, she saw her son’s mouth taped up and his limbs tied. He’d been tossed into the large tub—that loud noise must have been the boy’s desperate cry for help from kicking the walls.

Song Qilian gasped. As she was about to run to save her son, a dark shadow crept up from behind and knocked her down with a glass bottle.

She struggled to get up but received another heavy blow on her head. The force this time was even greater than before and she started to bleed.

The glass bottle shattered on the ground. Song Qilian was unable to stand up from the pain. She desperately crawled toward her son while turning her head back.

She was surprised to find that the attacker was Xiao Qun.

The “little girl” had already turned off Song Qilian’s cell phone and tossed it to the ground. She stared down at the woman from above and sneered, “Why did you all assume the person who was controlling Qiao Hui was Su Mansheng?”

Song Qilian immediately understood that she was in an extremely dangerous situation right now. She quickly came to a reasonable conclusion and attempted to talk to the malicious girl in front of her, “You weren’t wrong for being sexually assaulted. It’s natural for you to develop Stockholm syndrome under those circumstances, so there’s no need to feel burdened by guilt. You shouldn’t worry about submitting and bowing down to the horrible person who harmed you; please, believe me, a professional doctor can help you…”

“A professional? Like you? You couldn’t even tell I was putting on an act.” The “little girl” laughed sharply, then bent down and patted Song Qilian’s face. “You’re

too young, little girl."

That's when Song Qilian noticed that Xiao Qun's voice didn't fit her supposed age; it was too dry and rough.

"It's tiring to put on an act for long periods of time, but if I didn't pretend I was still traumatized, you guys would've questioned me and exposed my identity." Xiao Qun—or perhaps the middle-aged woman whose real name wasn't Xiao Qun—seemed to look much different just with a change of her expression. Her appearance also seemed to transform with the tone of her voice, becoming vicious, mature, and filled with hatred. She kicked Song Qilian's stomach heavily and cursed, "You bitch with all these stupid ideas, that man you indirectly killed was my son!"

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Song Qilian curled up from the pain and asked, "Who… who's your son…?"

"You fool, you still don't understand? I've never had what you call a 'victim complex,' I love my son the same way I love my husband!" The "little girl" once again kicked Song Qilian violently a few times before squatting down and taping the woman up. She explained as she wrapped the tape, "I've been engaged in everything willingly since the beginning. I was barely fourteen that year. I lived with my grandmother and aunt in the small village. My parents took my two little brothers to the big cities and worked tirelessly for them. They poured everything they could into making sure those two idiots could live a good life but never even bothered to look me in the eye. My aunt didn't think girls should spend their time in school and wanted me to quit to get a job or find a single man in the village to get married to. That way, at least her son could also live a relatively good life by proxy and use the dowry to buy him some nice shoes.

"And then I met him. He was a volunteer doctor at the village; he was tall, not particularly handsome, but very classy. He's like Léon from *The Professional*—oh, by the way, I watched that film with him in his house. We were lying on the bed together, the screen was above us; I'd never seen such a good movie in my life before and ended up crying for a whole night in my bed afterward. He bought me dolls and red dresses, then told me about the intimate things done between a man and woman. I'd asked my aunt about it before too, because I kept seeing her sneak out of the house in the middle of the night. Our neighbors were also always talking about how she was sleeping with the managers of the village while my uncle was working out of town. But my aunt freaked out when she heard me ask; she took out scissors and cut my hair, saying that I'm learning all the bad things… Ah, and the doctor was moving soon to give help to another place. Realizing that I couldn't find anyone else who would make me laugh like him, I eloped with him.

"I was deathly afraid of the police when I first ran off with him, worried that I would be captured and brought back to that run-down place, but I quickly discovered

that they didn't call the cops and instead were probably glad a burden was dragged off their shoulders. I became pregnant soon after, and of course, I discovered his slightly abnormal little kinks, so I helped him lure those little girls into the house so that he could play around with the toys. I hid very well, so no one knew of my existence. He was also very well respected in the village, so nobody suspected him. Life was great up until then, but then he betrayed me and fell in love with that little slut! He became less interested in me, so I had no choice but to kill him. I drugged his drinks and sliced his throat while he was drunk in the bath..."

The little girl walked toward the bathtub and turned on the faucet. Cold water poured over the little boy inside; he tried to struggle but slipped inside the tub.

"You killed my son so I'm going to kill yours." The "little girl" lifted her face and put on an innocent smile as she purposely spoke in a higher range, "I want you to watch him drown slowly before your eyes, and you silly so-called psychologist will have no way of saving him."

Tears rolled down Song Qilian's face as she began begging, "Xiao... whatever your name is, I've never harmed you before. I understand your loneliness and being unwanted since you were young; I've always wanted to help you. If you are here to get your revenge on me, please, don't hurt my son, take it out on me!"

The little girl shook her head in disdain and clicked her tongue. She had lived with this family for almost a week now and seemed to have grown quite interested in professional psychoanalysis. Her eyes locked on Song Qilian and studied the woman as she asked, "Are you a saint or something? Do you really like helping people that much? Why don't you psychoanalyze yourself instead? You're like a bitch in heat waiting for that Officer Xie to ride back on you, only he doesn't love you anymore. You feel insulted, betrayed, and you're extremely jealous of his new interest—and also extremely angry. That's why you finally wrote that mental health report to ruin his life... love is always blind and selfish, you're no better than me."

Song Qilian refused to be put down by these words and denied it, "I am not! I've never wanted to ruin him!"

"The sudden lift in your tone proves that you're getting defensive, you're lying." The little girl stared into Song Qilian's eyes, then suddenly twisted her lips up in an eerie manner and said, "Look, I can analyze you just like you do with me."

The water level in the tub was getting higher, the boy's nose was still barely outside but was getting close to being swallowed by the water. Song Qilian was already scared to death, but even in her fear she had a strange thought: *Xie Lanshan will come.*

Song Qilian realized that this twisted woman before her enjoyed issuing orders, so she used that grotesque obsession with control to buy herself some time. To keep the other's attention away while she attempted to pull her hands out of the tape, she looked at the woman before her and said as if speaking to a mentor, "That's right, he doesn't love me anymore! I feel restless every day thinking about how to get my

revenge on him. Maybe I should have met you sooner. I'm sure you could have given me a better idea than writing the psychological assessment..."

This satisfied the little girl's twisted heart as she laughed and danced around like a madwoman.

"I spent a lot of effort raising him into adulthood; he shared a lot of similarities with his father. Yet he even dared to be like his father and wanted to ignore and run from me. He wrote a love letter to a girl in his class during high school, so I kidnapped the girl and put her in a red dress, showing him his father's favorite image. Then, I forced him to murder her right in front of me. Luckily, nobody found the girl's dead body and my son also developed the same strange interest as his father... he feared me, hated me, and of course, I had thought he loved me..."

Song Qilian broke out of the tape in time and heard a motorbike rushing toward her house outside the window. Suddenly, she called out to the twisted woman, "Listen, he's here!"

While Xiao Qun turned to look outside the window, Song Qilian pulled herself off the ground and shoved the other woman down onto the ground. She then quickly picked up her son drowning from the cold water and rushed out the door.

The girl crawled up and chased after her with a knife in hand. Danger was steps away, and Song Qilian used all of her strength to carry her son downstairs, running right into Xie Lanshan, who was making his way up the stairs.

Once she saw his handsome and anxious face, Song Qilian couldn't stop her tears rolling down her face. She no longer felt exhausted or in pain. She knew she was finally safe.

Xiao Qun came down with a knife, then quickly turned to run back upstairs as soon as she saw Xie Lanshan.

"A-Lan, please save Changchang! H-he isn't breathing..."

Xie Lanshan was already making his way up when he heard Song Qilian's cries, then paused and hesitated to turn back. Shen Liufei arrived at the moment and called out to him, "Go deal with the culprit. I'll take care of the boy."

Xie Lanshan swiftly made his way up, forcing the mastermind to go up to the rooftop with nowhere else to hide.

The girl stood at the edge of the roof and called out in the chilly night with a knife in her hand, "Don't come any closer or I'll jump!"

Xie Lanshan didn't pull his gun, nor did he pursue the woman. He stood still and tried to convince her to turn herself in.

The woman certainly looked much younger than her actual age, but when she wasn't purposely trying to disguise herself as a young woman, her expression grotesquely exposed her age. In addition to her doll-like long hair, it made the woman look even more disturbing and twisted.

She was still looking around, hoping to find a route of escape, but then cried out as she swung her knife, "The real culprit is Su Mansheng! If she didn't seduce my lover,

our family would have been living in peace and happiness! How dare she restart her life after causing this tragedy? I hate her, I despise her!"

"Your hatred is directed toward the wrong person." Xie Lanshan took a step forward and said calmly, "You should hate Kong Xiangping and your parents who neglected you because they believed in this twisted patriarchy. Because of their negligence, that evil man easily stole your virginity and love with one red dress. Unfortunately, he never loved you, nor did he ever love Xiao Man. I'm assuming the reason why you two weren't killed was because he wasn't just an awful sexual assaulter. He was also a disgusting and ugly pedophile."

"You're lying!" the girl screamed in a frenzy. "He loved me! Before that whore came, he always loved me!"

"This was never a love story to begin with." Xie Lanshan shrugged coldly to indicate his disinterest in her delusions of romance. He said, "This is just the story of a poor and lonely girl with an inferiority complex who found the wrong teacher for her sexual education."

Xiao Qun felt her whole life's belief in love shatter at that moment. She charged toward Xie Lanshan like a madwoman. He dodged the attack with ease. Soon after, he threw a kick from the side and knocked the knife from the perpetrator's hand.

Xiao Qun rushed to pick up the knife, then lost her balance for a moment and fell off the roof. Xie Lanshan ran up just in time and caught the woman's wrist before she plummeted to the ground.

The winds blew harshly as her legs hung twenty stories above ground; the looming shadow of death could easily consume her at any moment. Xiao Qun grew fearful as she lifted her head, then pleaded to the cop above her, "Save me... I don't want to die... save me..."

She was certainly small and light. If she didn't struggle, Xie Lanshan could easily pull her up—and he was ready to do so.

In order to fight for her survival, the girl continued to cry to him, "I'm a mental health patient. I was sexually abused by Kong Xiangping when I was little and suffered huge trauma. Please save me and give me a chance to repent..."

"No, you're not a mental health patient." Xie Lanshan's gaze darkened at that moment, shocking even the girl he held. The man had rushed over to save her on instinct, but his gaze right now didn't seem like the same cop from moments earlier.

"I really am mentally ill. You can check with professionals." The girl seemed to be confident that she could once again fool professional psychologists after she had succeeded once. Besides, she had a true and horrific backstory to support her claims.

That, and mental health patients didn't need to serve sentences under the laws of the country.

"The judicial department has a database. Among the most severe violent crimes, over 70 percent of all criminals who have served their full sentences will repeat the crime upon release." Xie Lanshan's hand still held the woman. His gaze locked with

her eyes as he continued, “As for demons without a heart like you, the repeated offense rate is near 100 percent.”

The man’s bangs had grown long. Because of the angle he was holding the girl, his hair fell across his forehead and blew gently against the breeze. His eyes flashed through the hair strands like flickering lights in the dark.

“So what if that’s the case, what can you even do? You’re a cop. Your job is to arrest me. As for what the court finally decides in the end, that’s none of your business.” The little girl gave an arrogant grin as she looked at him, provoking him.

She would never stop killing.

Yet, as soon as she met the man’s eyes, she was stunned.

The handsome face was surrounded by the mist of night. Even though the moonlight was bright, the girl almost thought she imagined the cop was smiling.

It was a very faint but beautiful smile, and carried both the pure light of a saint and the darkness of a bloodthirsty demon.

And thus the demon had met another just like herself at the brink of her own death.

Tao Longyue and his team finally arrived after getting through the traffic. Captain Tao had just gotten out of his car and heard an enormous thump on the ground behind him before he could rush up the stairs.

He turned his head to look and the hand holding his gun loosened. Extreme shock and his automatic discomfort appeared on his face; he felt like puking out of disgust. His breath stopped briefly.

Xiao Qun was dead on the ground less than two meters away from him. Her eyes bulged out of their sockets and her brain splattered everywhere on the ground as her body twisted like her spine had been removed.

Tao Longyue stood frozen as he coldly watched this woman. Who claimed that fallen petals resembled the lovesick who leapt to death? It was clear the poet Du Mu had been lying. Though he knew it was an involuntary movement, the woman’s face and body began to spasm. Tao Longyue noticed the woman’s reddened eyes looked as if she would never rest in peace, but there was no sign of fear on her face—instead, there was only a peaceful smile.

(iv)

Tao Longyue rushed up the stairs and met up with Xie Lanshan, who was walking down. The latter explained with a calm expression that the suspect had refused arrest and jumped from the building.

This reaction was too calm. Tao Longyue wanted to pursue the question further only to see Xie Lanshan walk past him with no intentions of elaborating. He walked beside Song Qilian and asked about her son’s situation.

Little Liu Chang had just woken from Shen Liufei's CPR and immediately puffed up proudly as he saw Xie Lanshan. "Uncle Xie, listen! I didn't learn to hold my breath from you for nothing. I held my breath for three minutes underwater earlier!"

Song Qilian rushed to give Xie Lanshan a tight embrace with tears all over her face, ready to consume him with the passion burning inside her chest.

"At least you and Changchang are both okay, don't worry—"

Before Xie Lanshan could finish, Song Qilian had already cupped his face, stood on her toes, and pressed her lips against his.

The woman's lips were sweet and soft, but her kiss was passionate and uncontrolled. Xie Lanshan was a little shocked and widened his eyes; even though he didn't respond to her passion, he also couldn't bring himself to push her aside.

This scene also stunned Tao Longyue and he subconsciously glanced at Shen Liufei. The latter didn't show any reaction on his usual blank face; he simply lowered his gaze and walked away.

It was 10 P.M. and the city lights glowed. Animals returned to their huts while nocturnal predators waited for their time to hunt. Shen Liufei didn't want to return home and kept turning the handle on his bike until he reached the maximum throttle on his engine.

With the accelerator approaching its limit, he flew at a speed that raced against even the winds that blew past him as he darted through the ambient lights of the city.

Moonlight illuminated him from above, while the scenery ahead was a dreamlike cityscape. Yet that scene from earlier could not be erased from his mind; Shen Liufei pressed his eyebrows together and his bike's speed went up another notch.

He hadn't visited the boxing bar in a while, but for some reason, he felt the need to vent tonight.

The owner of the bar was happy at his arrival and greeted him enthusiastically, "Ah, Mr. Shen, haven't seen you in a while."

Shen Liufei gave a small sound of acknowledgment and glanced half-heartedly at the people sitting inside the bar; the noisy little tavern suddenly became quiet for a few seconds.

The newcomer was almost arrestingly handsome. His sophisticated outfit made him look a step above most people around him, which attracted looks from both men and women alike. The owner of the bar was quite acquainted with Shen Liufei and knew his customer better than others. He had always thought this artist gave off a more docile and melancholic air, but upon closer inspection, his expression and eyes contrasted against the calm appearance. What was even more interesting was that the man's face looked awfully young, perhaps as young as seventeen or eighteen, but the maturity in those sharp eyes made him look much older than his physical appearance. The bar owner didn't shy away like the others and called out to his regular, "Someone's heard of your name and came by a few times to request a spar with you. He happens to be here today too. Should I arrange for a round?"

Shen Liufei nodded, then said, “I don’t have my equipment.”

He’d made the decision at the spur of the moment so he hadn’t come prepared, but he didn’t mind too much since it was just a method of venting. The owner quickly brought a big man over and introduced him as a-Xun. The man was apparently a professional boxer who came for a quick buck and had been waiting for the rumored Mr. Shen for days at the bar.

A-Xun had unique features and tanned skin, sharing some physical characteristics of Southeastern Asian men. He was a tad taller than Shen Liufei, and the muscles on his whole body shined like metal. His large eyes were sharp like an unsheathed blade, making him look very intimidating.

Unfortunately, the man only looked tough in appearance. Shen Liufei didn’t even change his clothes and swiftly moved across the ring, knocking his opponent down within a few strikes.

A-Xun was still on the ground in a kneeling position as he held his stomach and grumbled. Shen Liufei felt a little apologetic; he didn’t hold back this time in order to release his pent-up anger and accidentally threw some heavy punches, only to harm the other more than he felt was warranted. He let out a small breath of air, calmed himself down, and walked toward his opponent. Courteously, he waved a hand at the man and offered to pull him back up.

But then a-Xun jumped like an underhanded predator waiting for an opportunity. He reached a hand out as if he were going to grab Shen Liufei’s, only to pull out a knife he had hidden well before the match. Then, he looked up suddenly and stabbed the knife right at Shen Liufei’s abdomen.

The artist was already distracted by his own thoughts and was completely caught off guard by this sneak attack. Thankfully, he reacted just in time to dodge a heavy impact—he held up his hand to shield his body as he took a step back. The knife didn’t strike his body, but it pierced through his left hand.

Fresh blood began dripping down; the audience gasped in shock. A-Xun quickly crawled up and ran out of the bar.

The bar owner called the cops amidst the chaos. Xie Lanshan received the message about a violent attack in the bar before he even made it back home.

Luckily, the stabbing hadn’t harmed important nerves on his hand. Shen Liufei looked at it and recognized that the muscle would heal fully in about three weeks.

Xie Lanshan dashed back home to see Shen Liufei sitting by the bedside, his arms pressed onto his knees and his back arched forward slightly. He stared quietly ahead of him as if in deep thought.

Xie Lanshan walked over with a stern and concerned expression and got down to one knee in front of Shen Liufei. He began unwrapping the bandages on the artist’s left hand as he pulled out a small bottle from his pocket, hoping to put extra medicine on the injury.

Xie Lanshan said that it was a special type of medicine the police used to deal with these kinds of injuries.

He carefully unwrapped the bandages to see a horrific and bloody wound that was still seeping. Xie Lanshan's heart ached as he eyed the injury, feeling his eyes burning up. He lowered his head and poured the open bottle onto Shen Liufei's palm, right onto the injury.

It was already shocking for him to go boxing at a time like this, and even more so that the fight had injured the man. Xie Lanshan pondered a little and immediately realized it was the kiss earlier that had made the artist act up.

Xie Lanshan complained to the man for not taking care of himself and scolded him as he treated the wound, "Please, you're an artist. You still need these hands to draw. Can't you just leave the beating-people-up part to me in the future?"

The liquid medicine stung more than driving a knife into an open wound. Shen Liufei couldn't withstand the pain and asked with a frown, "Just what is this medication?"

"Cops' special spice water." Xie Lanshan lifted his head and gave Shen Liufei an innocent, pure smile. "Pure healing with no side effects, and especially good for treating dishonesty."

"What?" Another sharp pain stung from his injury, intermingling with a strange tingling sensation as if countless bugs were biting into his flesh. Shen Liufei's expression remained calm, but his tone was raised, and he was clearly upset.

"No pain, no gain, cuz. Your life isn't just your own now. I won't let you be so careless anymore." Xie Lanshan pressed Shen Liufei's injured hand beneath his palm and rewrapped the injury with the bandages. He looked up again with a smile and said sternly, "I will always care for Qilian like a sister—she's family. I am willing to protect her health and safety at all costs, but you're different from her."

The young cop kneeled before Shen Liufei and took the bullet shell necklace off his neck. He then wrapped it around the artist's injured hand and pressed a rain of kisses on the palms as if holding a precious treasure.

Remember that I love you.

Remember to always remember this.

(v)

The two men exchanged a long kiss that night. Xie Lanshan could feel his body heat up with every passing moment, but suppressed his urge to go further in fear of opening up Shen Liufei's wound. Instead, his gaze danced around Shen Liufei's body. From those cold eyes, tall nose, down to his Adam's apple and chest, finally landing on the zipper of his pants. Xie Lanshan smiled and said, "Hey, cuz, want some kisses?"

Before the artist could respond, Xie Lanshan unzipped his pants, exposing his crotch.

He had never offered this service even when they'd gotten heated in the past, especially because Xie Lanshan had always been the one to enjoy such pleasures. Without any experience, Xie Lanshan lowered his head and said just before he took it in his mouth, "Sorry if I bite you."

Shen Liufei responded by pressing Xie Lanshan's neck down. Then, with heavy pants, said, "Practice makes perfect, and you'll have plenty of time for that in the future."

Xie Lanshan gently kissed, pecked, and sucked without technique, purely relying on instinct. He raised a hand to lock fingers with Shen Liufei's injured hand. The bandages were roughly wrapped around those good-looking hands, but the necklace rested quite elegantly around Shen Liufei's wrist.

Recalling their first meeting, Xie Lanshan suddenly bit down hard with his teeth and heard Shen Liufei's breathing grow heavier. The hardened cock in his mouth moved slightly and almost flew out of Xie Lanshan's mouth.

After swallowing the slightly bitter liquid, Xie Lanshan lifted his head to look at Shen Liufei. The artist's eyes were wet, giving a shade of warmth to his cold face that seemed to finally blend in with the beautiful moonlight.

Shen Liufei reached out and wiped away the white liquid on the corner of Xie Lanshan's mouth. His fingers gently massaged Xie Lanshan's lips before they reached up and grabbed the cop's hair. Shen Liufei leaned forward and pressed his lips on Xie Lanshan's.

It wasn't disgusting or strange to be so intimate with someone you loved, instead it was rather comfortable. Xie Lanshan felt he'd done well and leaned down by Shen Liufei's knee in satisfaction. He closed his eyes and rubbed his face on Shen Liufei's leg like a cat, completely ignoring the annoyed expression on the artist's face.

Moonlight leaked into the room through the windows and cast a layer of thin silver on the floor. The two kept this position for a while until Shen Liufei suddenly said, "Didn't you use to pester me about wanting to know about my family?"

Xie Lanshan looked up silently. A spark of surprise flashed across his eyes.

Shen Liufei lowered his head and met his gaze, then said firmly, "I can tell you right now."

The horrifying massacre was nothing but old news from the mouth of the survivor. Judging by the way he spoke, Shen Liufei seemed to have a closer relationship with his mother than his father; he would soften his voice whenever he spoke of her and called his father "that man."

He told Xie Lanshan that the police had been following the wrong clues, assuming that his uncle was the culprit, and had let the true culprit escape for a whole seventeen years; he was finally caught when the uncle's corpse was found after the same crime had been repeated many years later.

The brief explanation still shook Xie Lanshan. He had wanted to make a place for himself in Shen Liufei's life, but now he could feel nothing but heartache and asked, "You must hate the culprit with your whole existence?"

"Not really." Shen Liufei truly never considered this question in the past, and after giving it some thought now, he really didn't hold such a deep grudge. He simply said, "Because it may have been freeing for my mom."

Xie Lanshan, surprised by that, asked, "How so?"

Shen Liufei felt a little drowsy and lay on the bed, then said with his eyes closed, "In all of my childhood memories of her, she was being beaten by that man. There was almost no instance where she wasn't without an injury or bruise somewhere. He would also hit me and my brother. There were a few times when my mom tried to run, but he would say that he would kill himself along with me and my brother, so she had no choice but to endure everything. She lived her life enduring everything around her; I tried to talk to her and even scolded her for it, but her heart was too soft. She quickly fell into the traps of that man's lies and believed she could live through it if she just clenched her teeth. But that's not how you live a life."

Xie Lanshan didn't intend on pestering further and climbed up onto the bed after he listened to the story. He lay on his side and faced Shen Liufei's back, pressing their bodies against each other. He wrapped his arm around the artist's waist, buried his face into the exposed neck, then cradled the injured hand as the two fell into deep slumber.

Xie Lanshan paid another visit to the boxing bar the first few days of Shen Liufei's recovery. He was an experienced drug enforcement officer and naturally had some reliable spies who worked with him. He asked his informants to search for A-Xun's location.

A-Xun knew he'd screwed up and had been in hiding for a couple of days, but he'd seen no signs of cops showing up. He was growing bored with this life and invited a few friends over for hotpot.

He had grown used to eating the local cuisine and the spicy lamb meat hotpot. He quickly prepared a pot, fresh vegetables, lamb meat, seafood, and other common hotpot foods to pack. The location he picked was beneath a large tent outside a deserted shopping district, and he was ready to dig into the food after his friends arrived.

The six people had just sat down around the small wooden table. While the red pot was boiling, a person suddenly walked into the tent before they could even take two bites of their food.

Xie Lanshan flashed his police badge and gave a courteous smile to the space full of baffled men. "This party is over."

A-Xun knew the cop was after him. After confirming that it was only Xie Lanshan and there was no backup, he gave his buddies a look—the five men who sat around

him all stood up. They turned and glared at Xie Lanshan, ready to surround him and take down the cop.

Unafraid of fighting against these people, Xie Lanshan's gaze glossed over the boxers. Noticing that over half of them looked foreign, he said with a smile, "We Chinese people have a saying: every injustice has a perpetrator and every debt a debtor. I'm here for a-Xun, so please make way."

The boxers had all done some shady things in the past, but despite their hostile looks, most people were still afraid of cops. They circled around Xie Lanshan to intimidate the lone cop but didn't dare to throw the first punch.

Of course, Xie Lanshan paid no attention to them; he wouldn't bat an eye even if there were more. Xie Lanshan didn't like beating around the bush and locked his gaze on a-Xun, then walked straight toward his target without hesitation.

This was a blatant provocation. A-Xun called out, "Get him!" A smaller, tanned man pulled up a stool and slammed it toward Xie Lanshan's head.

Xie Lanshan only dodged when the shadow of the stool fell onto his shoulders, then turned and gave the attacker's ribs a roundhouse kick. The man dropped to the ground instantly and cried out in pain.

Xie Lanshan eyed the man on the ground and asked the rest of the party with a grin, "Still gonna stick around?"

This one demonstration proved the cop hadn't come unprepared. The crowd immediately dispersed, leaving a-Xun alone in the tent to face Xie Lanshan.

"Sorry... I didn't mean it..." The internal injuries he'd suffered from Shen Liufei's punches were still not fully healed. A-Xun knew he couldn't fight against the cop and could only apologize with his accented Chinese, pleading as he backed away, "I'm really sorry..."

"Cops would be out of work if an apology can settle everything." Xie Lanshan lifted an eyebrow and took a step forward. He kicked over the wooden table, the boiling hotpot spilled across the floor. A-Xun couldn't dodge in time and fell to the ground.

Xie Lanshan clenched his fist, his knuckles cracked as he stepped over a floor of oily vegetables. He smiled again. "You can return punches."

"Can't I just turn myself in? Here, cuff me up and just take me back to the station..."

"That's what a good cop does, but I'm a bad cop." Xie Lanshan's gaze darkened suddenly as he said, "He's an artist, how dare you hurt his hand."

The man looked like an elegant and beautiful pretty boy, but every punch he threw was deadly, making him seem more like an evil demonic god. A-Xun felt wronged and helpless. What kind of cop wouldn't even accept a suspect turning himself in? With the cop drawing closer to him, he had no choice but to run out the tent from desperation.

Xie Lanshan chased after him and noticed a luxurious cab drive toward him. The car flashed its headlights like sharp fangs inside the mouth of a beast, forcing Xie Lanshan to close his eyes momentarily.

The car stopped, and a man stepped out of the car. A-Xun rushed toward the man and knelt, grabbing the man's legs and calling him, "Boss."

The man didn't speak and only gave a-Xun a kick, which set the boxer running off like a coward.

"A-Lan," the man who stood against the light called out with his deep voice, a hint of satisfaction laced through the words. "Long time no see."

The headlights turned off. The man walked forward in the dark while Xie Lanshan instinctively took steps back. With every step, the shadow that chased behind him for many years engulfed Xie Lanshan and devoured his soul. Extreme fear overtook Xie Lanshan; his heart tightened.

He knew from the moment the man spoke.

Mu Kun was here.

He knew he should have run forward to capture the drug lord that instant, but Mu Kun pulled out a gun and pointed it at him with a smile. "Chinese cops aren't allowed to carry guns on regular duty. What a shame."

Xie Lanshan held up both of his hands as if to surrender wordlessly, his breathing heavy and rough.

"The cowherd and weaver girl could at least still see one another once a year after being separated by the river of heaven in Chinese myth, but we haven't seen each other in three years..." Mu Kun now finally made his way over under the dim light. He raised the gun and lifted a corner of his lips, exposing a terrifying face before Xie Lanshan.

The man had suffered a grave injury due to the helicopter explosion; despite his successful plastic surgery, there were still abnormal muscle lines on his face. He'd lost an eye, which was replaced by a fake red pupil.

This handsome face now had a touch of horror. Mu Kun seemed to have read what Xie Lanshan was thinking and pointed at his fake eye, then said, grinning, "I needed to keep it. It reminds me that I became like this because of you, that I must come back for you."

Xie Lanshan let out a heavy breath and said, "All right, and you found me now."

"Every day, I've been thinking of ways to kill you when I see you again..." Mu Kun held the gun and circled Xie Lanshan, studying his prey. He then stopped behind Xie Lanshan and pressed the muzzle at the back of the cop's waist, then leaned in beside his ear to blow flirtatiously on the cop as he said, "But I can't bring myself to do it anymore now that I've seen you, what should I do?"

Xie Lanshan felt goosebumps from this warm air by his neck. He knew the man was hoping to see him beg for his life, so he responded calmly instead, "You better kill me now, or I swear the next time we meet is when I'll arrest you."

“Killing you is too easy.” Mu Kun nudged Xie Lanshan’s waist with the tip of his gun, then slid it down and pressed it up between the man’s buttocks. He said, “I might as well kill that... Shen artist by your side.”

Xie Lanshan could feel his veins pop and shouted, “If you dare touch him, I swear I’ll skin you alive! Even if you try to escape to the end of the world, I’ll chase you down and kill you!”

Xie Lanshan’s reaction was within his expectation, but Mu Kun felt disinterested. He felt pained by this threat and changed the topic. “I’ve discovered who the Apostle is, don’t you want to know?”

Almost out of raw instinct, Xie Lanshan clenched his teeth but ultimately gave in. One word finally made its way out of his mouth, “Who?”

Mu Kun chuckled by Xie Lanshan’s ear. “Who could have known that the famous ‘Flaming Triangle’ in the drug enforcement team had one of my men?”

These words clearly meant that it must be either Liu Yanbo or Tao Jun. Xie Lanshan grew more anxious and asked, “So who is it?”

Mu Kun didn’t respond. He lifted a hand and struck the back of Xie Lanshan’s head.

Before losing consciousness, the last words Xie Lanshan heard were:

“A-Lan, I’ve missed you. Did you miss me?”

To be continued...

About The Author

Renowned and popular webnovel author in China, graduate of Tongji University in Shanghai and a member of Shanghai's Writers Association. Famous works include *Lip and Sword*, *In the Dark*, and *Gentries of the City*. Jin Shisi Chai is known for her sharp writing, deep insight into social topics, and unique style of prose that earned her a loyal following of readers on social media. Many of her works have sold adaptation rights in China from film to webcomics.